



The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome

Alondra Nelson

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The unexpected story of how genetic testing is affecting race in America

DNA has been a master key unlocking medical and forensic secrets, but its genealogical life has also been notable. Genealogy is the second most popular hobby in the United States, and the outpouring of interest in it from the African American community has been remarkable. After personally and professionally delving into the phenomenon for more than a decade, Alondra Nelson realized that genetic testing is being used to grapple with the unfinished business of slavery. It is being used for reconciliation, to establish ties with African ancestral homelands, to rethink citizenship, and to make unprecedented legal claims for slavery reparations based on genetic ancestry. Arguing that DNA offers a new tool for enduring issues, Nelson shows that the social life of DNA is affecting and transforming twenty-first-century racial politics.

The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome Details

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Cheri says

We think of DNA as clear-cut scientific evidence, but this book shows how in many cases the data are incomplete and, in any case, we often see only what we are hoping to find. Even so, DNA analysis can provide a valuable sense of social inclusion. The book is very dryly written and clearly aimed at academicians, but as a lay reader I still gained a deeper understanding of the politics of DNA and of the importance of the social role it plays in reconciliation for African Americans. I will no longer be surprised by the fervor with which ancient burial grounds are disputed or the strength of identification with unseen ancestral homelands, actual or presumed.

Jennifer says

I want to thank goodreads first reads and the author for allowing me this opportunity in winning a free copy of The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome for an honest review. I found this to be a fascinating book on the dna genetic genealogy of race, politics and identity. the author her unique insight into the genetic science and history of our dna. I find that gives people a more clear and understanding of how our dna transforms us all and how we too can understand our own history. I again would like to express my joy in reading this book and for anyone, like myself, who wants to understand and look into their own DNA this is a book to start that process.

Leslie Clement says

I can't add any insights or thoughts about that book that hasn't already been said in previous reviews. I have a background in Black History and Archaeology and I was thrilled when I received this book. It brought up some issues I'd not thought of regarding DNA studies and Reparation in clear just-technical-enough prose. Kudos to Ms. Nelson. She has a winner here.

Megan says

This is an accessible and engaging look at DNA in the particular social context of African-American genealogy. Nelson examines how DNA and genetic lineage knowledge--and the act of interpreting said knowledge--assist people in shaping their own identities, senses of self and orientation to the past, and community ties. The book is weakest on the reparations angle of its subtitle, but that's because DNA's usefulness in seeking legal reparations *is* weak; in general, the American legal system is not equipped to deal with reparations. I wished Nelson did a deeper dive into the commercial aspect (but I'm someone who snarks at those Ancestry DNA TV commercials OMFG "HISPANIC" IS NOT A NATIONALITY), but she did an excellent job with--and brought sufficient skepticism and empathy--to explaining why people are interested in DNA technology as a tool to understand themselves and to explore their identities in the context of the past and in the context of evolving communities.

Disclosure: I received a review copy of this book from the publisher.

Zoe's Human says

Alondra Nelson has done an exemplary job of breaking down incredibly complex social and scientific topics into language a layman can understand without oversimplifying. While it was a bit dry at times, *The Social Life of DNA* was replete with information. It was so dense with knowledge that it took me thrice the normal time to read.

Not only do I feel that I have learned something about genetics and genealogy, I have, more importantly, come to a greater understand of the cultural significance of these studies in the black community. I have long understood the theft of culture and family from Africans and African-Americans as a part of the many horrors of slavery. What I had failed to understand was how emotionally significant an ethnic identity can be to a person. In particular a person for whom this identity has not only been taken but replaced with an identity as victim.

This has given me a great deal to process for which I thank the author.

I received a complimentary copy of this book via a Goodreads giveaway. Many thanks to all involved in providing me with this opportunity.

Amy says

This book takes a look at genetic genealogy (specifically in tracing African American roots), at it's positive and negative aspects, and at it's capabilities and limitations. Dr. Nelson explores how DNA testing effects the discussion of race in America, and brings the discussion back into the public sphere. She also briefly reviews the history of attempts for African Americans to gain reparations for enslavement of themselves and there ancestors (A fight that has never truly stopped). She looks at it's functions as a means of providing a social connection, personal identity, and inclusion in a group. She examines how it effects the politics of race in the U.S. and around the world. She looks at it's impact on reconciliation of individuals' identities and between "races". It was a very interesting read.

Camille says

"...the double helix works a spyglass that telescopes back in time allowing us to see the healing that remains to be achieved in American society."

The Social Life of DNA is a wonderful book that explores the history/significance of DNA testing for African-Americans and at the same introduces a much-needed critique of the ways in which it's been received and put to use. It is at once an academic and personal journey with interesting twists and turns.

If I have any complaint, it's that the whole thing was far too condensed. It was evident from every page that Nelson had a LOT more to say (heck she was introducing new terms and dropping footnotes in the last paragraph of the book). So I'd hope one day to read the "Directors Cut", since I'm certain there's lots more

fascinating material on the cutting room floor!

McKenzie Richardson says

I received a copy of this book from LibraryThing in exchange for an honest review.

This is a very interesting topic and Nelson covers it well. Overall, I liked the book. I think the sections on reparations were especially interesting in the brief history given and how DNA has been used in connection with reparations.

I like how Nelson combined her own personal experience with the history of DNA and how it has been used in matters regarding race. This added an individualized tone to the text, which helped to balance out the science and history.

While I found the information in the book useful, the text was often very dense and the amount of information was overwhelming. It took me almost a month to get through this book, which is significantly longer than it usually takes me to finish a book, especially considering how short the book is. This is not a book one can just speed read through. I liked the book, but some of the chapters are kind of hard to get through because of their density.

Esther Marie says

One of the best books I've read recently. Highly, highly recommend. It was excellent in terms of research, writing, and, most of all, content! I learned quite a bit about the place genealogy holds in Black American/African-American communities. (There's a whole world of history that we never learn in school...) Add to that recent breakthroughs in matrilineal and patrilineal DNA testing after the mapping of the human genome, and you have an exceptional book. I tend to be pretty critical of non-fiction books, but Nelson did an incredible job and took great pains to present this history in a balanced and objective way. Apparently Alondra Nelson works at Columbia. I can only hope I'll have the chance to hear her speak one day!

Roxanne says

This is a Goodreads win review. This is the first book I have read about DNA. I have always wondered about my own DNA roots but cannot do a family tracing. It is a complex book to reconcile our racial origins.

Sarah Schulman says

Fascinating book about the marketing of genetic tracing by private companies to African Americans looking for reconciliation with Africa and healing from slavery. It raises so many, many questions - the book could have been three times as long: Does biology tell us who we are? Is family the source of our identity? A view into very thorny questions about the ethics of placing science at the service of commerce.

BMR, LCSW says

It was okay. I have complex feelings about reparations, and about DNA testing to find out where in Africa my ancestors MAY have come from. My younger sister got one of the free tests offered a few years ago, and we are matrilineally descended from a "Bantu speaking Congolese" woman. It's nice to have a big piece of the puzzle from before the abduction from Africa, and the sale of our ancestors in this hemisphere. There is so much more to our story between there and here.

Tonstant Weader says

I was very eager to read *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations and Reconciliation After the Genome*. I requested it from the library several months ago and have waited impatiently for my hold request to rise to the top. I am interested in genetics and the socio-political implications of DNA research and testing. I also endeavor to be an ally in the struggle against racism. I am aware of the troublesome history of science being exploited and misused to further racist agendas from Charles Murray's infamous *The Bell Curve* to the 2014 publication of *A Troublesome Inheritance* by Nicholas Wade, a piece of work so egregious it was denounced by the very geneticists he uses to support his assertion that natural selection has led to worldwide racial difference in IQ, political stability, and economic advancements.

Alondra Nelson has a very disciplined framework for *The Social Life of DNA*. She writes about the history of ethnic genotyping through research mitochondrial DNA (maternal) and Y-chromosome DNA *paternal" and some of the ambiguities that arise. For example, the African DNA samples come from where people are living today in Africa, not where they may have lived in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. The entire database of African DNA identifies about 250 tribal groups in total, but one country may have that many tribal groups, so it is more general than precise. There are often bitter discoveries, too, since many find significant European ancestry, a genetic witness to the frequent rape of black women by their slaveowners.

Nelson also looks at how DNA has been used around the world in reconciliation projects such as restoring the stolen children of Argentina to their grandparents and their biological families. DNA has also been used in seeking reparations. Some of the most interesting chapters of the book detail the history, the research and legal strategies of more than 100 years of seeking reparations for the crimes of slavery. The suits against the insurance and banking companies that profited as supporting industries of slavery by insuring slave ships and slaves and lending money for loan purchases are fascinating even though stymied by sovereign immunity and the ridiculous requirement that plaintiffs prove a direct descent from individual slaves insured by these companies knowing full well that censuses did not name slaves in the census records.

Another interesting section looked at the current movement of reconciliation through DNA testing to find one's ethnic affiliation in Africa, to travel and connect with "kin" and form bonds. Some people, like the actor Isaiah Washington, have even applied for and been granted dual citizenship as many countries will award dual citizenship based on DNA evidence that African Americans are children of this most consequential involuntary diaspora. Nelson suggests it is possible that this growing interest in returning to the motherland may arise out of disappointment with the retrenchment of civil rights advancements and the frustration of the reparations movement.

The rest of the review can be read on my blog

Jennifer Rilstone says

I read this for its loose relevance both to my graduate studies in genetics and my own genetic ancestry results (or 4% thereof). I think it was a beneficial read. I'd previously accepted the limitations of the data you can glean from DTC ancestry tests, and sort of dismissed their value as being loosely interpretable at best. So I think the importance to me of reading this book was pulling my mind out of the technical granularity and considering what social value these tests bring to people who feel disconnected from their personal history. Thank you to the author for reminding a scientist of the human perspective. It also lead me to reflect on the potential value of expanding the databases of DNA samples available from the different African populations, so I hope that does improve. It was a good reminder to be cognizant that such databases need to be truly reflective of the needs of all the potential beneficiaries of the technology--beyond ancestry testing and inclusive of health applications. Oh and one more insight from the book--DNA has this somewhat hallowed status in popular culture, probably thanks to its precision in forensic applications. It's important to keep in mind this perception, given that it's highly misleading to think of all DNA technologies in the same way.

David Leonard says

Alondra Nelson's *Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome* is thoughtful provoking, timely, and forward thinking. It embodies the power in interdisciplinarity scholarship, building bridges between the historic and the sociological, between African American political discourse and scientific inquiry, between everyday conversations and social movements and those archival and 'scholarly' spaces. The book's power is evident (and was felt) in the fact that as I finished I was reminded almost daily about its dialogical engagement with the world around me: the commercial about ancestry; the discussion and airing of Roots; discussions about reparations and Diaspora. Written over 10+ years, it is a testament to the strength of the scholarship, the depth of the research, and the power of the writing that the work is as relevant and timely today as it was when Dr. Nelson started the work. Offering a powerful framework for interdisciplinary community-relevant scholarship, this work also models the type of prose that elevates intellectual discourse. At its core, *Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome* tells a story: of identity; of history; of racism and scientific racism; of the liberatory possibilities of science; of capitalism; of Diaspora; of the complex debates about the power and limitations in/of science; of reparations and racial reconciliation; and so much more. It is written in a way that not only walks readers through the debates and themes but also introduces readers to many powerful voices. It draws readers into the discourses and the social dimensions of science, DNA, and so many debates over many years; it brings together so many stories with beauty, depth, and ease. "The boom in genetic ancestry testing over the last decade has been extraordinary. It's every-rising and decade-plus of staying power continues that this pursuit is neither a fad nor a trend," writes Nelson, Dean of Social Sciences and Professor of Sociology at Columbia University (165). "For good and for naught, we use DNA as a portal to the past that yields insights for the present and the future. We use DNA to shine a light on the social trauma and to show how historic injustices continue to resonate today.... Genetic ancestry testing is but one implement in an entire tool kit of tactics that, marshaled together, must be brought to the project of building racial reconciliation and social justice." Exceptional on so many levels
