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All hail DNA: the constitutive rhetoric of AncestryDNA™ advertising

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ABSTRACT

Although the scientific community has frequently criticized the reliability and validity of direct-to-consumer ancestry DNA testing (DTC DNA), sales continue to rise, with an estimated 26 million U.S. American customers to date. This surge speaks to a desire among U.S. consumers to fulfill a symbolic need constructed by these DTC DNA companies. Using constitutive rhetoric as a methodological lens, we unravel the ways Ancestry® constitutes consumers, ideologically and narratively, as genetic carriers of ethnic ancestry. Specifically, we analyze 17 commercials that aired on cable television in the U.S. from 2015 to 2018. We argue that Ancestry® constitutes subjects as objective harbingers of DNA who form the basis of homogenous genetic ethnic communities, which obscures the scientific constraints of DTC DNA and the sociocultural consequences of linking genetics with ancestry. Ultimately, the rhetoric within these commercials paradoxically provides U.S. Americans a resource for uniqueness—to feel differentiated from everyone else, while encouraging them to feel a sense of belonging to some greater collectivity. Ancestry® capitalizes upon the appeal of symbolic ethnicity and perpetuates the idea that ethnicity is unproblematically biological, thus enabling and constraining identification accordingly.

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Genetic ancestry testing has been on the rise since the turn of the twenty-first century; industry estimates indicate that more than 26 million U.S. Americans have taken tests through 23andMe® and AncestryDNA™, spending between $100 and $350 to receive results regarding their ancestral heritage (Kolata, 2017; Regalado, 2019). In their study examining genetic markers of identity, Jobling et al. (2016) acknowledged that the recent rise in the use of genomics within medicine is largely attributed to advances in DNA sequencing and the ability to analyze DNA variations, contributing to the increase in commercial testing companies. People are increasingly understanding their past in genetic terms, and genetic accounts of identity are just one way that technology is altering the way we live and represent racial difference (Skinner, 2006). Though many scholarly and popular sources have criticized the science behind direct-to-consumer ancestry DNA testing (DTC DNA), sales continue to surge. This surge can be partially attributed...
to the marked rise in advertising by DTC DNA testing companies. As of 2016, Ancestry* spent $109 million on advertisements, which is five times the amount spent by its largest competitor, 23andMe® (Regalado, 2018).

To examine the increasing popularity of DTC DNA testing, we analyze 17 AncestryDNA™ advertisements televised in the U.S. between 2015 and 2018 and assess how consumers are interpellated and constituted by the ideological and narrative features presented through DNA-oriented claims regarding ancestral heritage. Utilizing a theoretical and methodological framework of constitutive rhetoric (Charland, 1987), we argue that Ancestry* constitutes subjects as objective carriers of DNA who form the basis of homogeneous genetic ethnic communities. In doing so, Ancestry* obscures the scientific constraints of DTC DNA and the sociocultural consequences of linking genetics with ancestry. In particular, this obfuscation works to promote the notion that ethnicity and race are biological phenomena, thus, natural and static rather than socially and rhetorically constituted. To build this argument, we turn first to an overview of the science behind DTC DNA and the criticisms associated with such testing.

**Ancestry and DNA**

While Duster (2014) argued that *ancestry* is often used to refer to geographical areas from where biological ancestors hailed, the important question remains: which ancestors? The answer is not terribly complex if dealing solely with immediate relatives, but when one extends this tracing to six generations, the result is 64 biological ancestors; thus, Duster (2014) questioned, why would someone choose to represent their biological lineage using only a handful of those ancestors? This question speaks to the methods utilized by the companies who purport to supply customers with ancestral heritage based upon a sampling of their individual DNA. Ethnic lineage testing draws on the unique features found within Y-chromosome DNA and mitochondrial DNA and then infers ancestral linkages to contemporary nation-states or broad cultural groups. Customer DNA is compared against the company’s reference database of genetic samples of *contemporary* groups of people living in broad geographic regions; if the sample DNA and reference DNA match some undisclosed number of genetic markers, the individual is deemed as sharing a distant ancestor with the person who provided the referent DNA sample (Jobling et al., 2016; Nelson, 2008). The ambiguity of ancestry DNA test results is tied to the proprietary nature of the company’s methods; thus, one can only speculate about the level of frequency of ancestral informative markers used for inclusion and exclusion, as well as what these companies utilize as so-called pure referent populations (Duster, 2014).

After receiving genetic test results, customers have a great deal of freedom in utilization. Many test-takers seek definitive information regarding family histories, so genetic profiles serve as the beginning of a process of ethnic identification that moves from the biological to the biographical (Nelson, 2008). Data derived from DNA also allows for an additional genetic layer to be used in comparison with one’s familial narratives and subsequently tests the tenuous connection between racial identity and genetic ancestry (Foeman, 2012). Foeman et al. (2015) stated, “living with ambiguity, determining how to share information, and determining how much of the information will be accepted are themes that ancestry DNA testing presents” (p. 4). Individuals may not necessarily accept the genetic genealogy as proof of identity, especially in situations where the results cannot be utilized in
constructing one’s individual and collective biographies (Foeman, 2012; Nelson, 2008). Contradictions and surprising results should be expected, given that the “data” derived from this form of ancestral heritage tracing are controversial.

**Criticisms of DTC ancestry DNA testing**

Though genetic methods based on the study of populations are reliable and respectable scientific tools, “the practice of individual genetic ancestry testing is unreliable and powerfully influenced by cultural and other social forces” (Jobling et al., 2016, p. 143). One main criticism of the scientific reliability of this type of DNA testing, especially for the purpose of tracing one’s ancestral lineage, lies in the sampling and validity of the methods themselves. A valid random sampling of even a miniscule percentage of a large geographic population requires a database of DNA samples in the millions (Duster, 2014). Instead, these companies rely upon opportunity samples, often composed of several hundred or a few thousand samples from small groups of contemporary people in various regions. This type of testing also neglects ethical considerations, including the scientific integrity of research that uses problematic racial/ethnic categories as key variables and the ability of genetic researchers to report findings without promoting biologized ideas about racial difference (Hunt & Megyesi, 2008).

*Sense About Science* (2013) asserted that genetic ancestry tests are no more than genetic astrology, explaining that what the scientific community knows about genetic ancestry is about whole group populations; thus, the specific ancestral information given to individuals based upon small samples of their DNA is a gross manipulation of the techniques involved in this type of DNA testing. Despite the endless stream of articles that challenge the science behind individualized genetic ancestry testing, companies providing the testing continue to experience growth in customers and profits, with AncestryDNA™ and 23andMe® hauling in the vast majority (Regalado, 2019). The recent surge in customers, despite contradictory research by the scientific community, speaks to a strong desire among U.S. consumers to fulfill a symbolic need constructed by these companies. One theoretical concept that helps to explain this appeal is symbolic ethnicity.

**Symbolic ethnicity**

As defined by Waters (1990), ethnicity is a dynamic, subjective identity, invoked by individuals at will; however, the ability to freely choose ethnic identification is available only to specific U.S. Americans, namely, those who are White. Ethnic identification is constructed through knowledge about one’s ancestral heritage, often coming from family stories and/or formal documentation. Information is used selectively within historical, structural, and personal constraints. While people are typically aware that their heritage is derived from multiple ancestors, they often identify with only some or none of those ancestors and can change their ethnic identification over time for a variety of motivations (Waters, 1990). A person’s motivation for an ethnic identity likely stems from a desire to avoid “ethnic blandness” (Jiménez, 2010, p. 1766). This desire is what Gans (1979) alluded to in his definition of *symbolic ethnicity*, which is “a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation” and “a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having
to be incorporated in everyday behavior” (p. 9). Symbolic ethnicity describes a pursuit of identity by U.S. Americans removed from their immigrant ancestors by at least three generations.

For some U.S. Americans, the belief that ethnicity is biological acts as a constraint for one’s ethnic choices; Whites have a great deal of latitude in choosing whether to identify themselves in ethnic terms, whereas people of color are far more limited (Waters, 1990). The symbolic, flexible, and voluntary nature of ethnicity for middle-class White U.S. Americans is in glaring opposition to the ways in which non-White U.S. Americans experience ethnicity; the social and political consequences of being Latino/a/x or Asian American are neither symbolic nor voluntary and are very real and often harmful (Waters, 1990). Symbolic ethnicity encourages a focus on the varying meanings, experiences, and expressions of race and ethnicity, as well as the myriad factors that influence ethnic options, which can include “passing” as nonethnic or acting accordingly with stigmatized ethnic identities (Kachtan, 2017; Matsunaga, 2007). DTC DNA capitalizes upon the appeal of symbolic ethnicity while perpetuating the idea that ethnicity is unproblematically biological, thus enabling and constraining identification accordingly. The analysis we offer here explicates how this process is both evoked and obscured through AncestryDNA™ commercials. Using constitutive rhetoric as a methodological lens, we unravel the ways Ancestry® constitutes consumers, ideologically and narratively, as genetic harbingers of symbolic, ethnic ancestry.

**Constitutive rhetoric**

In theorizing a constitutive form of rhetoric, Charland (1987) pointed to the use of identification (rather than persuasion) as a key component of the rhetorical process. Identification occurs through a process of interpellation, where subjects are inscribed into ideology through narrative, which leads them to construct a coherent unified identity. When the interpellated subject recognizes and acknowledges themselves in rhetoric, they participate in the narrative, thus identifying with a collective subjectivity. Constitutive rhetoric operates, then, at the “intersections of ideology, collective identity, and unity” (Hill, 2016, p. 31). Though the existence of subjects and publics appears natural and prior to rhetoric, this assumption reflects the “ideological ‘trick’” of constitutive rhetoric (Charland, 1987, p. 137).

Charland (1987) identified three “narrative ideological effects” of constitutive rhetoric: (1) constitution of a collective subject; (2) positioning of a transhistorical subject; and (3) the illusion of freedom (p. 134). First, audiences are hailed or interpellated into an ideological discourse through recognition and acknowledgement of a collective identity that seems pregiven and natural (but is preconstituted and reconstituted by former and present rhetoric). Second, time and space are collapsed by rhetoric so that narrative identification occurs, regardless of any historical or geographic separations among characters, and the viewer takes their place within the reality and the collective identity that the rhetoric constructs. Finally, characters who comprise the narrative must adhere to and perpetuate the logic of the narrative through action in the material world, though they may perceive these actions as individual choice and free will. To produce these effects, constitutive rhetoric must unfold in a two-part process, which advertising is uniquely positioned to fulfill.
The two-part process of constitutive rhetoric includes the interpellation of audience members and the facilitation of a corresponding action. Successful interpellation in advertising “occurs through a series of ideological associations arising from the narrative structure of the message” (Kilambi et al., 2013, p. 50). Through visual and discursive storytelling, viewers of advertisements enter into a narrative structure that positions them to implicitly, and collectively, accept the ideological associations undergirding the message. In doing so, the message orient subjects “toward particular future acts” (p. 50). By interpellating and calling viewers to action, “the discourse of advertising constitutes viewers as ‘deficient’ in some quality, attribute, or value, which is happily remedied through the consumption of material objects” (p. 50). Advertisement campaigns simultaneously appeal to and obscure ideology through narrative identification, thus constituting a collective subject that lacks the resources necessary to complete a desired action, which the company’s product can easily rectify.

To understand the constitutive rhetoric of AncestryDNA™ advertising, we conducted a rhetorical analysis of 17 commercials that aired on cable television in the U.S. from 2015 to 2018. Artifacts were collected through Ancestry’s® YouTube channel and iSpot.tv (a marketing and media measurement website). We focused on commercials that advertise AncestryDNA™ products. The search date range (2015–2018) encompasses the years immediately prior to, during, and after the time period when DTC DNA testing doubled in the U.S.; advertisements for DTC DNA kits are not only prevalent in the U.S. but most people who purchase the kits and submit to be tested are located in the U.S. (Regalado, 2018). The commercials range in airtime, some for periods as short as two weeks and others continuing to air up to the time of this publication.

During coding, we began by applying the lens of ideological criticism, looking at presented and suggested visual and discursive elements in order to discern the latent attitudes, beliefs, and values being constructed and represented in the commercials. What we found in this initial stage of analysis was a complex layering of ideology with narrative, which led us to constitutive rhetoric. Similar to Stein (2002) and Hayden (2011), we employ constitutive rhetoric here as both theory and methodology, to identify and analyze the predominant ideological and narrative themes among all 17 AncestryDNA™ commercials, and understand how they simultaneously constitute consumer subject positions while appealing to a collective consumer identity.

We argue AncestryDNA’s™ rhetoric operates as constitutive rhetoric through a three-fold process. First, AncestryDNA™ advertisements constitute collective subjects through the ideological discourse of DNA. By presenting DNA as “extra-rhetorical” (Charland, 1987, p. 133) the commercials construct DNA as ideologically neutral, thus obscuring scientific doubt and legitimizing the foundational premise of Ancestry’s® products. As subjects within genetic discovery, viewers are constituted through a collective identity of objective-DNA-carrier that prompts participation in a narrative of genetic ethnic ancestry. Second, the commercials authorize identification with a genetic ancestry narrative that invites viewers to transcend individual differences and divisions to form a collective identity, promising deep, transhistorical connection. Viewers are thus positioned as rightful members of ethnic communities, far removed from historical ties and consequences. Finally, the commercials call consumers to act on behalf of their individual desires for the sake of connection and community while obscuring the scientific, social, and cultural constraints and consequences of these actions. In doing so, they reaffirm the purchase of
their product as the primary action that viewers can and should take to fulfill their need for ethnic identification and individuality.

The constitutive rhetoric of AncestryDNA™

AncestryDNA™ commercials’ rhetoric includes a multitude of strategies to convince viewers that genetic DNA testing can correct a deficiency, a common rhetorical feature of advertisements. Unique in this case is consumers are not buying a tangible product they will own; rather, consumers send something material and personal (their DNA) to a company and receive something symbolic in return. Specifically, Ancestry® constructs and fulfills a symbolic need for collective identity, claiming that they can provide consumers with a stronger sense of ethnic ancestry and thus, a stronger sense of personal identity. Presumably, the results of one’s DNA test provide consumers with a personal story that connects them to a larger cultural narrative that they did not have prior to utilizing AncestryDNA™. These claims communicate to viewers that (a) knowing one’s self is important, (b) many people do not know their true and complete self, and (c) only Ancestry® can unlock the story of one’s true and complete self. To elicit this need for symbolic identification, Ancestry® first engages in the work of legitimizing the use of DNA to discover ethnic ancestral heritage, thus simultaneously constituting consumers collectively as carriers of their own (objective) truth (their personal and ethnic identity) while obscuring existing critiques of the company’s proprietary scientific methods.

Collective identity: scientific object(ivity)

A central feature of all of the AncestryDNA™ commercials we analyzed is the objectification of ethnicity through DNA, (re)presented as “accurate knowledge of external reality” (Fuchs, 1997, p. 5). The mere mention of DNA hails audiences into a preexisting culture of rhetoric that espouses the objective knowledge-reality of genetic material. However, Fuchs (1997) revealed how the perception of objectivity actually “requires painstaking and patient work of removing the biases and prejudices which are part and parcel of the profane world” (p. 5). Ancestry® rigorously engages in this work in two predominant ways. First, they employ “linguistic means of separating subject and object” (Gergen, 1992, p. 104) by articulating a reality in which DNA is an object of discovery that exists outside of the consumer or as a foreign fragment within the body of the subject, but never as a complex or interrelated whole. Second, they construct an “internal/external distinction between the context of justification and the context of discovery” (Fuchs, 1997, p. 5) by making explicit and implicit claims of objectivity through scientific and positivist objects (e.g. numbers, pie charts) that operate as external, neutral devices of discovery. In doing so, they hail viewers into a cultural rhetoric of objectivity and constitute subjects as conduits and carriers of this objectivity.

DNA as object of discovery

Many of the commercials we analyzed construct DNA as an object of discovery external to the consumer by representing it as a personified, agentic force. These representations include DNA as omniscient narrator, pedagogue, or divine authority. Concluding taglines state “Only DNA can tell your story” (Lezlie) and “Discover the story only your DNA can
tell” (Lyn, Livie, and Kim). Other AncestryDNA™ commercials used similar taglines to position DNA as an omniscient narrator of one’s life; an all-knowing, third-person observer who has exclusive yet neutral insight into the intricacies of the subject’s (consumer’s) life story. Implied is that this knowledge is so exclusive, not even the subject is privy to it until they turn to DNA for its point of view. Consumers’ stories are the proprietary domain of an external, all-knowing object.

DNA is also represented as an educator that directs consumers toward discovery, albeit in an authoritarian and pedantic way. To access this vast knowledge of DNA, Ancestry® explains in “Summer Sale” to “Get your ancestry DNA kit, spit, mail it in, learn about you.” The personal learning that Ancestry® offers their consumers is not up for interpretation or debate. This is made clear by the ways “customers” react to their test results with surprise. In fact, consistent in all of commercials were actors receiving unexpected though not undesirable results: “A few results came up that were really shocking” (Chad), and “The most shocking result is that I’m 26% Native American. I had no idea” (Kim). Representing the knowledge of DNA in this way, Ancestry® implies that its authority is definitive; it provides consumers with revelatory information that is real and true, and their only option is to bank that knowledge and reframe their ethnic identity accordingly.

One AncestryDNA™ commercial goes so far as to explicitly characterize DNA as a divine authority. In “The Sum of Us,” Ancestry® claimed that “DNA not only creates life, it can change one.” Once again, DNA is presented as an external agentic force that bears significant, absolute authority over the life of the potential consumer. Though many viewers might already associate DNA with scientific discovery and authority, Ancestry® continues their work of removing any trace of doubt about DNA’s objectivity by reminding viewers of the foundational and functional power that DNA wields over everyday life. This power is so all consuming, in fact, that consumers must also be reminded that they can never escape DNA because it is always inside of and a part of them.

In addition to personified, externalized characterizations of DNA, many of the commercials included internalized depictions of DNA as a foreign, fragmented object of discovery. A few user depictions acknowledge the internalized yet obscured nature of DNA when they describe how they, or others, came to “find” or “see” DNA. Courtney explains how her test results led her to explore where her ancestors came from. In her reflection, narrated as a letter to her foremothers, she says, “When I found you in my DNA, I learned where my strength comes from.” Lezlie shares how people have always ascribed her ethnic identity but she says the DNA test “confirmed what … people had seen in me all my life.” In these examples, the subject’s self-perception is implicitly characterized as merely an impression while the DNA that is lurking inside of them is depicted as the confirming agent, which codifies and legitimizes identity in a seemingly objective way. Ethnic ancestry moves from self-identification to self-excavation and discovery of once alienated data.

As an extension of this internalized scientific discovery, several commercials construct DNA as an ever present but unknown part of a person. For example, the “Summer Sale” commercial urges viewers to “see how a place, and it’s people, are all a part of you.” The commercial “America’s Greatest Come from Everywhere” depicts the varied and unexpected test results from “American sports heroes” with a soundbite proclaiming, “I didn’t know I was part Russian.” Horacio captures the meaning of this theme when he states, “My ancestry DNA results revealed parts of me I didn’t even know.” Essentially,
DNA is represented as an internal, foreign fragment—an object of knowledge that awaits discovery through scientific excavation, which supersedes all other self or other-generated knowledge about ethnic identity. The work of cultivating the objectivity of DNA does not end at this separation of subject from object, it also manifests through repeated references to externalized, neutralizing objects of scientific discovery.

**Scientific objects as devices of discovery**

Ancestry® employs a wide range of recognizable scientific and positivist objects throughout their commercials in order to neutralize the context of scientific discovery and make it accessible to a broad audience. Fuchs (1997) reminded us that objectivity “seeks to broaden the community of knowers to include those not privileged enough to attend the scholastic universities” (p. 13). This process includes developing and (re)constituting a symbol system that assumes, implies, and justifies claims of objectivity without requiring command of an exclusive body of knowledge. Ancestry® employs such a symbol system, made up of charts, graphs, forms, and numbers, which Gergen (1992) suggested are common signifiers used to signal claims of scientific precision and impartiality. By regularly incorporating recognizable, external devices of discovery into their proprietary scientific claims, Ancestry® seeks to (re)affirm and capitalize upon a broad community of knowers constituted by the rhetoric of objectivity.

One of the most common recognizable signifiers of precision and impartiality that Ancestry® incorporates into their commercials is their pie chart. With percentages and color-coding that attempt to break down and visually depict the specific proportions of consumers’ ethnic ancestry, the pie chart has become synonymous with the Ancestry® brand. In fact, pie charts and their corresponding percentages were featured in 11 of the commercials we analyzed, making it one of the most commonly occurring symbols in our dataset. In many cases, the chart is featured as an image hovering above, behind, or at the side of the actor in the commercial as they refer to their percentages. In others, the chart appears as a document received through email or as an image on an actor’s phone, which is the case in the “Summer Sale” commercial that advertises Ancestry’s® email and app features. Even in commercials where the chart is not explicitly depicted, its presence is implied through references to percentages. For example, in Katherine & Eric’s commercial they both explain his results: “through the DNA I found out that I was only 16% Italian” and “He was 34% Eastern European.” Breakdowns like these occur in every commercial that depicts a consumer testimonial. Indeed, the capacity to speak about one’s ancestry through the language of percentages seems to be Ancestry’s® primary commodity. As such, consumers are collectively constituted as vehicles of objectively procured numerical data that correlate to self-identity, which they can translate into a discourse of ethnic authenticity utilizing the proprietary tools of AncestryDNA™.

**Positionality: community narrative**

In addition to constituting consumers as vessels of DNA, AncestryDNA™ commercials also interpellate consumers into a transhistorical narrative of genetic ancestral community. Within the framework of constitutive rhetoric, Charland (1987) argued that the formal structure of narrative history allows for a group of individuals to be conceived as if they were united. In doing so, “the ‘struggles’ and ‘ordeals’ of settlers, as a set of
individual acts and experiences, become identified within ‘community,’ a term that here masks or negates tensions and differences between members of any society” (p. 140). The telling of narrative histories is what makes it possible for past and present individuals to be conceived of as one united group embarking on the same quest (Tate, 2005). In the commercials we analyzed, that quest is the discovery of one’s rightful genetic community—made unquestionable by the objective authority of DNA. Our analysis revealed community to be a prevalent narrative that was perpetuated through a strategic use of “ethnic” objects and the representation of ethnicity as shared language.

“Ethnic” objects
Within the vast majority of the commercials, objects were rhetorically positioned as representative of the various ethnic identities revealed by test results. Jiménez (2010) argued that one component of ethnicity is the cultural symbols and practices that create a sense of belonging to a group. Ancestry* interpellates consumers into a collective ethnic identity (rightfully bestowed via DNA) through cultural symbols. Ultimately, the commercials work to rhetorically position “ethnic” objects such as clothing, clay pots, blankets, cookbooks, and food as the gateway to discovering a sense of belonging with one’s ethnic community.

In Kyle’s commercial, he states “Growing up, we were German,” as viewers see him wearing German lederhosen with a collection of beer steins sitting on a table behind him. These objects are stereotypical representations of Germanness meant to clearly establish Kyle’s identity. However, Kyle’s DNA test revealed his identity to be Scottish and Irish, coming as a shock to him: “The big surprise was we’re not German at all.” Kyle is now seen wearing a Scottish kilt as his pie chart appears and he states, “52% of my DNA comes from Scotland and Ireland,” he concludes with, “I traded in my lederhosen for a kilt.” In another commercial, Lyn tells viewers she did not know her ethnic origins. Her pie chart appears next to a wall displaying African masks as viewers learn that her DNA has connected her to a variety of African countries. Finally, Lyn is seen before a mirror, putting on a Nigerian gele as she states, “I looked in the mirror and I was trying not to cry. Because it’s a hat, but it’s the most important hat I’ve ever owned.” In both examples, ethnicity is constituted through clothing and objects that represent the countries to which these individuals are now connected through DNA.

For Kyle, being German meant wearing lederhosen and drinking beer from decorated beer steins, but once he discovered he is “actually” Scottish/Irish, it meant turning in his lederhosen to wear a kilt. For Lyn, her quest to “learn as much as I can about my culture” is represented through hanging African masks on a wall and putting on a gele. The difference between these commercials is, for Kyle, who is racialized White, DNA results constitute a surprise discovery that authorizes his movement from one European ethnic community to another. For Lyn, who is racialized Black, the results provide a meaningful confirmation of an ancestral gap. Regardless, physical objects are used in the same capacity, thus obscuring the nuances and complexities of ethnic identity in relation to perceived racial identity.

Similarly, in “The Sum of Us,” we learn about a couple’s “journey of discovery.” Sarah’s partner knew that he was from India, but Sarah learned from her DNA test that she also has Indian heritage. Sarah and her partner then shop for groceries at an Indian grocery store, cook Indian food, and read books about India. In another commercial, Livie informs viewers that she has always told people that she is Hispanic as she sits on a
bench with hand-woven blankets, colorful clay pots, and hand-woven pillows with her pie chart revealing that she is 33% Native American. The “Summer Sale” commercial features multiple vignettes, all with percentages of heritage represented: a man at a Spanish restaurant eating Paella (38% Spanish); a young woman walking through an outdoor food market reading a travel book and sampling fruits (29% Polynesian); a mother and daughter cooking together using a Lithuanian cookbook (25% Baltic). The historical connections one typically has to cultural objects is no longer necessary; Kyle can put on a kilt, Lyn can wear a gele, and Livie can buy clay pots in order to experience a deep connection to these ethnic communities, which their DNA has granted membership, regardless of any lived experiences or awareness of the significance of such symbols. Additionally, these newly discovered connections to ethnic communities are all rendered equivalent, flattening un leveled experiences of symbolic ethnic identification.

**Ethnicity as shared language**

AncestryDNA™ commercials also hail viewers into a seemingly authentic though transhistorical ethnic community by positioning ethnicity as experienced through shared language. The perception that language can connect a person to ethnicity is documented in Sullivan’s (2010) study, where participants who attended Irish language immersion events practiced symbolic ethnicity by learning to speak Gaelige, during which they felt connected to this identity regardless of how many generations they were removed from it ancestrally. AncestryDNA™ commercials engage these perceptions of linguistic authorization as a means of interpellating consumers into the practice of symbolic ethnicity with regard to the genetic community that Ancestry® identifies for them. Consumers are invited to join their “rightful” ethnic community by learning the requisite language.

In “The Sum of Us,” Sarah and her partner are seen learning and practicing a new language that is clearly native to India. Her partner is depicted sitting with a tutor while pronouncing words on flashcards; later, the woman uses the flashcards with the same tutor and we see that they have booked a trip to India. While waiting nervously in a hallway, a young Indian girl approaches and they kneel in front of her as the male character says “It is nice to meet you” in the language they practiced. Learning this language has allowed them to speak to their newly adopted daughter in her native language and implies that their AncestryDNA™ results connect them to this ethnic identity genetically, symbolically, and hereditarily, though with none of the political, social, and material consequences that are often tied to racial, historical, and geographic realities of ethnicity.

Another example of shared language as representation of (genetic) ethnicity is found in a commercial featuring Kelly Ripa at a bakery attempting to speak Italian to order biscotti from a baker. She tells the people surrounding her that her ancestors traveled from Italy all the way to “exotico New Jersey.” The baker then speaks in Italian to Kelly as he points to a map of Italy and the commercial ends with Kelly shouting “Ancestry DNA per tutti!” In the “Summer Sale” commercial, a man is depicted sitting at a restaurant in Spain using a Spanish/English dictionary as he places his order. Ancestry® taps into a long-held assumption among U.S. Americans about which cultural signifiers constitute the most significant markers of ethnic identification, first and foremost including language and food (Waters, 1990). Both were featured prevalently throughout the commercials we analyzed and were utilized as essential components to authorize the transhistorical narratives woven into
these commercials in order to constitute viewers’ desire for and identification with a genetic ethnic community while obscuring any historical and political complexities that undergird these identifications.

**Action: ethnic identification**

Once viewers are hailed and interpellated into the constitutive rhetoric of AncestryDNA™, they are called to act by seeking, receiving, and reacting to their test results in specific ways. Viewers are promised a bountiful new perspective through which to view the world via specific actions that Ancestry® constitutes as appropriate reactions to test results, including: (1) learning about your newly identified culture, with the understanding that this information is desirable, (2) connecting to your newly identified past, so long as these connections are personal or objectifiable (e.g. places and things), and (3) taking a leisurely (read: non-political) journey associated with your newly identified ancestry, insofar as you are open to it changing your life.

Ancestry® customer testimonials inform viewers of various cultures, connections, and journeys their DNA test results authorized and inspired: “I’m just trying to learn as much as I can about my culture” and “My DNA showed that I’m Native American. It connected me to cousins who taught me about our tribe.” The voice over in one commercial claims “AncestryDNA™ can open you to a new world of cultures to explore” and you can “be inspired to learn about the people and the traditions that make you, you.” Viewers can also connect to their past through people and places; voice overs remind viewers to “Go explore your roots, take a walk through the past, meet new relatives, and see how a place, and it’s people, are all a part of you” and “Unlock your past, inspire your future.” AncestryDNA™ also encourages customers to “connect more deeply” to their past by using DNA results to “change your life.” In all of these examples, viewers are called to act by identifying with and enacting their new genetic ethnic status, bestowed upon them by their AncestryDNA™ results, in ways that perpetuate it as real and true, unexpected yet desirable, and personal rather than political.

One remarkable distinction among all the commercials we analyzed is the juxtaposition of racialized White characters, who express surprise and excitement at the ethnic identities they have discovered, with racialized characters of color, who often express conformation and solace. Katherine thought she married an Italian, but her husband Eric found out he is “34% Eastern European,” and Kyle grew up thinking he is German, only to find out that 52% of his DNA “comes from Scotland and Ireland.” In both cases, the characters present their dominant percentages in order to identify new ancestral connections and interact with cultural objects. In contrast, Courtney, a racialized Black woman who narrates a message to her foremothers while women dressed in traditional warrior clothing walk across a desert to the sound of drums, is represented with a pie chart highlighting (through enlargement) 3% Ivory Coast/Ghana and subduing the segment showing 31% Ireland and Scotland. Unlike the examples with Eric and Kyle, Courtney is not invited to excitedly learn more about an unexpected culture, connect with living ancestors, or take a leisurely journey to any of the other dominant areas reflected in her pie chart. Instead, she narrates what the 3% Ivory Coast/Ghana result reaffirms about her strength, while her European ancestry is never acknowledged.
Prior to sending Ancestry® their DNA, consumers are led to believe that the possibilities for discovery are endless. Upon receiving results, they are presented with limitless options for what to do with this new information. However, as our analysis revealed, this illusion of freedom is the result of careful rhetorical work; ideology and narrative are interwoven in ways that obscure the faulty and tenuous reality of DNA and construct options for identification that are limited to a singular narrative with parameters for future action. Furthermore, as Waters (1990) argued, the illusion of limitless options is available to one portion of the population who take these tests: White U.S. Americans who are not constrained by socio-political or historical consequences.

**The implications of genetic ethnic identification**

Long before the availability of direct to consumer genetic ancestry testing, Gans (1979) argued that given the increasing perception among U.S. Americans that they were becoming culturally homogenized, they would continue to search for ways to differentiate themselves. His supposition was that since ethnicity was no longer a source of major conflict, this would be the most ideally suited distinguishing characteristic to which U.S. Americans would flock. AncestryDNA™ commercials construct and exploit a similar need for differentiation among viewers by constituting a desire for authentic, verifiable ethnic identity. They fulfill this need by replacing ethnic blandness with symbolic ethnicity; however, symbolic ethnicity is paradoxical due to contradictory desires among many U.S. Americans for a quest for community and a longing for individuality (Waters, 1990). Symbolic ethnicity is also dependent upon a pluralist society, but makes the achievement of such a society more difficult; it relies upon the concept of equality between all ethnicities and the availability of choice to enjoy the traditions of one’s heritage without any of the social costs involved in sharing in that heritage (Waters, 1990). The erasure of any social costs associated with ethnicity and ethnic group membership is only one implication found within our analysis.

Another troubling implication is how inadequate science is obscured through Ancestry® rhetoric which, in this case, works to both construct ethnicity and reify race as biological phenomena and thus further the problematic notion of genetic essentialism, reifying notions of indigeneity and group membership (Jobling et al., 2016). Additionally, Ancestry® evades corporate responsibility by contributing to essentialistic and deterministic understandings of the human genome. Rather than utilizing their platform to engage consumers in a more complex understanding of scientific and genetic discovery, they appeal to the allure and enchantment of natural and static identity (Nordgren & Juengst, 2009), doing very little to encourage a nuanced understanding of racial and ethnic identity.

Though these implications seem theoretical, they have real-world consequences. AncestryDNA™ test results were recently used by Ralph Taylor, a White business owner who claimed minority status in order to receive governmental funds reserved for women-owned and minority-owned businesses. After submitting the results of his ancestry DNA test (90% European, 6% indigenous, and 4% Sub-Saharan African), he was approved for the program at the state level in Washington but was denied at the federal level, then filed a lawsuit “out of principle” as he considers himself to be Black based on DNA evidence (Zhang, 2018). This case points to our previous claims about the problematic nature of these tests in perpetuating race as a deterministic biological phenomenon,
rather than as a social construct, and the pull toward symbolic ethnicity for White U.S. Americans.

AncestryDNA™ commercials authorize viewers to select whichever ethnicities best serve their immediate goals, whether that be learning a language, traveling to the far-off lands of one’s ancestors, collecting ethnic objects and clothing, or in the case of Ralph Taylor, filing for minority status for your business. This rhetoric paradoxically provides U.S. Americans a resource for uniqueness—to feel differentiated from everyone else—while also allowing them to feel a sense of belonging to some greater collectivity, albeit a belonging that will not interfere with one’s sense of individuality (Waters, 1990). However, this resource is narrow in terms of whom it benefits; in particular, White U.S. Americans will continue to be able to choose when, where, and which ethnic identifications they claim and subsequently share with others, which allows symbolic ethnicity and its many social and political paradoxes to persist. Though Ancestry® ultimately hails everyone into the ideological force of DNA, only those with racial power and privilege can truly be interpellated without socio-political consequence.

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