White Race-Shifting: The Implications of Genetic Ancestry Testing for Critical Race Theory

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Abstract

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Mitchell Rae Yang

The rise of direct-to-consumer genetic ancestry tests have implications for white racial identity formation, social capital, and race shifting, which warrants the attention of critical race scholars and cultural studies scholars. By promoting the fictional idea that DNA can reveal *who* we are, these direct-to-consumer devices purport to people the fantasy of transgressing boundaries of racial identity. This study uses a mixed method approach combining in-depth open-ended interviews with a qualitative relational analysis of YouTube videos to better understand how and why white people are turning to commercially available ancestry tests to race shift.

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents ..... **v**
List of Tables ..... **vi**
Introduction **1**
Literature Review **5**
Methodology **16**
Discussion **19**
YouTube themes 19
Interview themes 26
Conclusion **29**
Bibliography **31**
Appendices **38**
Appendix A: YouTube video information 38
Appendix B: YouTube video thumbnails 40
Appendix C: Interviewee recruitment poster 49
Appendix D: Consent form 50
Appendix E: Interview questions 53

List of Tables

- Figure 1. Regions tested for by 23andMe
- Figure 2. Regions tested for by AncestryDNA
- Figure 3. Rate of European vs non-European results of YouTubers
- Figure 4. Rate of European vs non-European results of interviewees

Introduction

From the denunciation of infamous figure, Rachel Dolezal (Oluo, 2017), to globally recognized politician, US Senator Elizabeth Warren (Nilsen, 2018), to Gwen Steffani continuously asserting that she is in fact Japanese (Calaor, 2023), the trend of white people making claims to non-white identity has been relentless. It's the Jessica Krug's in tenured positions (Autry, 2020) exposing themselves as recently as 2020, and the Kent Johnson's being exposed (Hsu, 2015) over time throughout the 1990s in the poetry community. This desire to "pass" as another race is not a new phenomenon, however, the reason and direction in which people are attempting to pass seems to be shifting. At one time, people needed to pass as a matter of survival, but this was never without consequence. As Hobbs (2014) wrote in *A chosen exile: A history of racial passing in American life*, "those who passed experienced personal and familial losses differently (2014, p. 5). Still, to pass meant passing into freedom, into safety, and out of discriminatory laws and practices for Black Americans (Hobbs, 2014). Yet today, the practice of passing has been appropriated by white people who try to pass as non-white. Dolezal needed to justify her presence as the president of her region's NAACP chapter and Stefani needed to justify her Harajuku era, and to do so required them to make claims to non-white identities and attempt to pass in a way which aligned with those egregious claims. By exploring the "mechanics of descent" behind race-shifting (Leroux, 2019), and the ways in which direct-to-consumer (DTC) genealogy tests are being used for both white racial identity formation (Croll, 2007; McDermott & Samson, 2005; Rowe et al., 1994) and racialized identity-seeking practices (Leroux, 2018, 2019; Nelson, 2016a, 2016b; TallBear, 2013a, 2013b), we can better observe the phenomenology of whiteness in relation to passing and answer the question of why people distance themselves from and deny their whiteness.

In 2018, the genealogy company Ancestry released an advertisement called "How can DNA bring neighbours together?" advertising their at-home genetic ancestry testing service, AncestryDNA, which was rapidly growing in prominence. In fact, MIT Technology Review reported that more people took an at-home DNA test in 2018 than across all prior years (Regalado, 2019). The commercial depicts two white men, neighbours, both drinking coffee outside on their respective porches in the cold. Attempting to make friendly conversation, the first neighbour turns to the second and, in a prominent Irish accent, holds up his shamrock clover mug in a toast and shares that it's his first Canadian winter. The second neighbour callously nods back without a word, immediately ending the interaction and leaving the first neighbour uncomfortable and feeling obviously unwelcome. The scene ends and we are now shown that same rude neighbour sitting in the kitchen accompanied by his wife as he reads the results of his AncestryDNA test for the first time. In utter bewilderment, the man gawks at his laptop screen showing that 15% of his genetic ancestry is traced back to Ireland. Stupefied, the man sits frozen, apparently receiving support from his wife who rubs his back as he comes to process this newfound information. The commercial, I argue, is demonstrative of the mindset that genetic ancestry tests can be and are a tool for root-seeking and identity-making (Leroux, 2018; Nelson, 2016a; TallBear, 2013b).

The commercial transitions to the next day where both men stand outside in their opposing backyards as each of their children play hockey. Pulling out his phone, the impudent neighbour leans over the tall fence dividing the two houses and tells the other neighbour to "check this out," proudly holding his phone on a zoomed in image of Ireland as part of his

ancestry results. Amazed, the Irish man exclaims that his neighbour is *from* Cork and the two revel in their apparently shared heritage (and identity). Jumping forward slightly in time, the freshly christened Irish man's wife approaches the fence holding a tray with four mugs, offering the established Irish man and his wife some hot cocoa. As the two men continue to become acquainted in their recently discovered brotherhood, one of the children sends a hockey puck through the fence between the two backyards. Exchanging conspiratory glances with each other, the two men abruptly take a crowbar to the fence, tearing it down.

A montage plays scenes of the two men designing and building a new yard together that merges their two areas into one as a narration delivered by the newest Irish man speaks to the audience. He recounts, "I was never good at making friends out of neighbours, then I tried AncestryDNA and learned we had more in common than just a fence" (Ancestry, 2018). The commercial concludes with a woman's voiceover, telling consumers they can discover their origins as a final shot plays of the two men hugging during a game of backyard hockey. The image blurs and text appears which reads "Unlock your past. Inspire your future" (Ancestry, 2018). We can understand that one's "origins" are meant to be interpreted synonymously with one's ethnic identity, and herein lies the problematic and core tenant present in the marketing of at-home genetic ancestry tests that sell the dream of being something other than just plain white.

The commercial is not discrete with its messaging; purchasing an AncestryDNA test will provide you with a roadmap of how you can now identify racially and will enable you to access new cultural spaces. Dangerously, this commercial also implies that without any shared genetic lineage, a person's poor neighbourly etiquette is rational, excusable, and even justifiable. In point of fact, when the Irish man's advances for friendship are rebuffed, the commercial makes no attempt to challenge this rude and impolite conduct. Instead, he remains the protagonist of the commercial, and importantly the viewer is expected to relate to him and to emulate his actions by buying an at-home test of their own. Had the man and his behaviours been depicted in a negative light, viewers would perceive him as an antagonist and consequently be disincentivized from making a purchase with Ancestry.

The market for direct-to-consumer (DTC) genetic ancestry tests is not small by any means, with a projected market value of over two billion dollars (USD$2.2B) within the next few years (Global Industry Analysts, Inc, 2021). Of this market share, the majority is hoarded amongst only a handful of companies, with Ancestry and 23andMe standing out among the rest. MIT Technology Review reported as of January 2019 that of the 26 million consumers of genetic DNA testing services, Ancestry's kit, AncestryDNA, accounted for 14 million of all tests sold with 23andMe's eponymous product following closely behind at 9 million (Regalado, 2019).

Ancestry continues to be a powerhouse in the realm of at-home DNA genetic tests which are available in three different formats at three distinct price points. In its most basic form, consumers are promised origin and ethnicity matches as well as DNA matches (Ancestry Ireland Unlimited Company, n.d.). The second option gives this and a three month "World Deluxe" membership which grants access to the company's international records database, and finally, at the most expensive tertiary option, consumers can expect to also be given insights on what Ancestry calls "Traits[1]" (Ancestry Ireland Unlimited Company, n.d.).

[1] The website writes: "AncestryDNA currently offers 36 traits: Omega-3, Vitamin C, Vitamin D, Vitamin E, Beta-Carotene, Vitamin B12, Alcohol Flush, Asparagus Metabolite Detection, Bitter Sensitivity, Caffeine Consumption, Cilantro Aversion (Coriander), Lactose Intolerance, Sun Sneezing, Sweet Sensitivity, Savory Sensitivity ,Facial Hair Thickness, Birth Weight, Cleft Chin, Finger Length, Earlobe Type, Earwax Type, Eye Color, Freckles, Hair Color, Hair Type, Hair Strand Thickness, Iris Patterns, Male Hair Loss, Skin Pigmentation, Unibrow,

The company's website states that their service creates the opportunity for people to learn "what region of Europe your ancestors came from or whether you're likely to have Southeast Asian heritage" (Ancestry Ireland Unlimited Company, n.d.). Not only does this statement clearly locate the company's clientele to people of European descent, it also suggests that there is a desire–and indeed a value–to add complexity to one's racial identity, in this case whiteness.

The second giant in the at-home DNA ancestry testing space, 23andMe, was started in 2006 and has self-reported over 12 million ancestry test kit sales on its website as of early 2023 (23andMe Inc., 2023). Having announced 9 million test kit sales only four years earlier (Regalado, 2019), the company's rise in popularity has allowed them to reach their twelfth million sale, which continues to suggest a growing trend to quantify lives and identities.

Notably, 23andMe tests for genetic DNA for 2,266 regions whereas AncestryDNA tests only break down DNA into 1,986 regions. Of the regions identified by 23andMe, 876 (38.7%) are categorized as European compared to Ancestry's 1,638 "European" regions (82.5%). 23andMe has grouped their DNA into eight regions which are as follows: European, East Asian, Indigenous American, Western Asian and North African, Sub-Saharan African, Central and South Asian, Melanesian, and as having "Recent Ancestry in the Americas." In the same manner, AncestryDNA also identifies regions, though they only include the following six: Africa, America, Asia, Europe, Oceania, and West Asia. The increased levels of detail provided by 23andMe's test versus the test offered by Ancestry is potentially indicative as to why the former is seemingly more popular amongst influencers based on my data sample of YouTube videos.

European	East Asian	Indigenous American	Western Asian and North African	Sub-Saharan African	Central and South Asian	Melanesian	Recent Ancestry in the Americas
876	331	9	312	122	105	6	505
38.7%	14.6%	0.4%	13.8%	5.4%	4.6%	0.3%	22.3%

Table 1. Regions tested for by 23andMe

Africa	America	Asia	Europe	Oceania	West Asia
113	115	59	1,638	8	33
5.7%	6.8%	3.0%	82.5%	0.4%	1.7%

Table 2. Regions tested for by AncestryDNA

The allure of so-called *influencers* on young people and their decisions is irrefutable. By forming parasocial relationships, which occur when communications from a media figure are interpreted as significantly as face-to-face interactions with someone interpersonally (Chen, 2016), YouTubers build audiences that trust them (Pereira et al., 2018). Today, there are hundreds

Wisdom Teeth, Endurance Fitness, Heart Rate Recovery, Muscle Fatigue, VO2 Max and Sprinter Gene" (Ancestry Ireland Unlimited Company, n.d.).

upon hundreds of videos uploaded, collectively amassing millions of views on the topic of genetic ancestry testing and its results. YouTubers delivering dramatic reactions to their ancestry test results dominate the video category. It is not uncommon to see video titles and thumbnails (the cover image of a video shown in search results, chosen by the video creator) with provocative language and imagery. This exaggeration both in performance and the promotion of performance is clickbait, "short teaser messages that make use of cognitive biases to increase the likelihood that users click on the accompanying link" (Jung et al., 2022, p. 2). Given YouTubers reliance on metrics and engagement with their content (Christin & Lewis, 2021), the implementation of misleading titles and flashy graphics is symptomatic of the larger burden that influencers carry: to entertain and to influence their followers.

Alarmingly, viewers seem to have extracted from these videos the trend of taking an at-home genetic ancestry test with the express intention of being "pleasantly surprised" by the results. Indeed, the pursuit of higher and higher engagement metrics has transformed artificial enthusiasm depicted by (white) influencers into a real keenness amongst their (white) viewers to "discover" their ethnicity and racial identity. I argue that this desire to reimagine oneself racially contributes to a vicious cycle of race-shifting whereby whiteness is not seen as a proper racial category, leading white people to look outwards for a racial identity to consume and utilize to their benefit. There seems to be a fascination amongst the influencers' audience in the possibility of race-shifting and embodying both whiteness and 'Otherness.' This, in turn, reproduces the dangerous belief that whiteness is not a racial category. Indeed, when whiteness is invisibilized by white people themselves, the facility for their whiteness to consume another racial or ethnic identity becomes a dangerous probability. As Peggy McIntosh (1988) reminds us, white privilege is invisible; and so it follows that whiteness itself is often invisible too.

As identities, and especially maginalized identities, continue to be transformed into forms of social currency, the promotion of these at-home tests and the market for them is accordingly predicated on the desire to race-shift as a mechanism for accruing a surplus of social capital (Foucault, 1976; Haider, 2018; Leroux, 2019; Mills, 1997). Within a neoliberal society which values an "awareness" of social injustices and which prioritizes identity politics, the practice of race-shifting by white people poses significant dangers to the well-being of Black, Indigenous, and visible people of colour where resources–both material and social–are scarce.

Critical race theorists (Ahmed, 2007; L. M. Alcoff, 2006, 2015; DiAngelo, 2018; Fanon, 2008; Said, 1978; Stoler, 2010) and critical race feminists (Crenshaw, 1991; Sharpley-Whiting, 1999; Spivak et al., 2008; Stoler, 1996) have written extensively on the concepts of race and identity. Critical whiteness studies exists within these discourses; and although a growing body of literature, Sara Ahmed reminds us that there is "an almost habitual anxiety about what it means to take up the category of 'whiteness' as a primary object of knowledge" (2007, p. 149). Ahmed in turn argues that as a phenomenological concept, whiteness can be reified to something "whiteness does" and which "allows whiteness to be done" (2007, p. 150). For Ahmed, whiteness is informed by its social orientation in the world, as in the way it is placed and positioned socio-politically, culturally, and materially. To study whiteness, therefore, is to study its orientations, determine its origins, and trace its constructions as an omnipresent entity and attribute; and potentially speak it into existence in a form even stronger and more concrete than it already is (Ahmed, 2007).

On the basis of Ahmed's work, my research seeks to answer (1) how white individuals use direct-to-consumer ancestry tests to interpret their own whiteness and racial identity; (2) why white people seemingly seek to appropriate a new racial identity other than white in the context

of their intentions to undergo genetic genealogy testing; and (3) what the impacts and consequences are for communities of colour when white people use genetic ancestry test results to race-shift.

Literature Review

Ethnic and racial divisions and structures of community have historically always been a result of specific social politics that justify the inclusion and exclusion of *other* members (Weber, 2009). The project of defining and segregating individuals into defined categories and groups is a project to control who is allowed to have access to power. The idea that there exists an "us" and a "them" has been an important concept of many developed by critical race scholars over the years. In *Mistaken Identity*, Asad Haider (2018) presents his understanding of identity, drawing heavily on cultural studies scholar, Stuart Hall's argument that the "decomposition and disorganization of the workers' movement" led to the erosion of what is today known as identity politics (as cited in Haider, 2018). Amidst rising political and class tensions in the context of an increasingly unstable global economy, a "crisis of hegemony" arose according to Hall and fellow scholars Antonio Gramsci and Nicos Poulantzas (Haider, 2018). The crisis of hegemony represented a crisis for the state itself which was founded on and reliant on an ability to control populations and prevent mass mobilizations of the people (Haider, 2018). Hall (1996) states that identities need to be understood as "produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies" (1996, p. 17). For Hall, identity emerges as the result of contrasting people to create an 'other', rather than comparing to create a 'we' because, he argues, identity formation is predicated on the allocation and exchange of modalities of power (1996).

Edward Said (1978) has also spoken at length about the creation of the *Other* in the process of defining the East in contrast to the West. He coins this process 'Orientalism' and describes it as "a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts" which claim to speak of mythical far away lands, inherently opposed to conceptualizations of the Occident (Said, 1978, p. 20). Europeans could read travel logs and fantasize not just about the cultural practices but the cultural *differences* between the Other and themselves (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999). Considering again the marketing tactics of AncestryDNA, the repeated use of the example of someone of European descent wondering not only about whether or not they potentially have Southeast Asian but also East Asian heritage is indicative of the pervasiveness of Orientalism and Ancestry's reliance on Orientalism to attract consumers and maintain their dominance in the DTC genetic ancestry testing market (Said, 1978). These companies' apparent fixation on the East, I argue, is not incidental by any means either as it relates to the "commodification of the Other as a source of enjoyment and excitement" for "Western/Northern American cultures [to] visually and metaphorically 'eat' or consume racially marked bodies as a kind of spice or condiment to flavour the bland whiteness" (Gutowska-Kozielska, 2020, p. 143).

The ideological practice of othering groups of people facilitated the process of imperialism in continental Africa, the Americas, and Asia due to the dehumanizing consequences that othering produced (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999; Stoler, 1996). Despite all of this, the category of "white" was still yet to be developed and would continue to remain outside of political and practical vocabulary for some time. And yet, at the same time, the idea of whiteness

and its pervasiveness as the norm, or default which everything and everyone else should be contrasted to, did exist implicitly. Pulitzer Prize winner, Toni Morrison, in her book *Playing in the Dark,* explores the way that race has and has not been talked about through literary techniques (1993). She explains that often authors are communicating values and cultural norms in their works, and by writing for characters who are not explicitly given a race, the readers are told that this means the character is white (Morrison, 1993). It is this simultaneous erasure *and* reinforcement of whiteness that contributes to the unequal dynamic between white people and non-white people.

In racial identity development, an individual is perceived as inhabiting a "healthy" self-conceptualization of their identity upon completing a series of stages or levels in which their sense of self is interrogated and then reified (Rowe et al., 1994). Contemporarily, research on white racial identity and whiteness often makes reference to Janet Helms' work in 1990; which itself had been influenced by William Cross' work on Black racial identity. Helms discussed what she called the white racial identity model based on her development of the white racial identity development (WRID) model. Despite the nomenclature seemingly implying that WRIDs are tools to conceptualize the formation of white racial identity, Helms' models are designed to measure how white people understand racism based on a development scale which measures the empathy of white individuals towards racialized minorities through stages (2017). Helms' work on Black racial identity development (BRID) and white racial identity development models have remained influential in the contemporary context's efforts to conduct meaningful critical white theory scholarship. White racial attitudes and white racial consciousness are instead being proposed as more effective scales for which an individual's self-understanding of their whiteness can be formulated (Rowe et al., 1994).

As such, the traditional model outlining the development of a white racial identity is often seen as inadequate because of the way that it involves comparing whiteness to minority identity without being cognizant of the ways in which "whites represent the society oppressing" minorities all the while minorities understand this and continue to develop their own identity (Rowe et al., 1994, p. 131). This is the source of the largest criticism of white racial identity development (WRID) because it considers the racial attitudes that white people hold towards other racial minority groups and not of themselves; a pattern reminiscent of how Orientalism functions to invisibilize the 'occident' while emphasizing the 'orient.' Under this structure, white racial identity development presents whiteness as something which white people are unaware of (Rowe et al., 1994).

In response, the concept of *white racial consciousness* was presented as an alternative to WRID. It is defined as "one's awareness of being White and what that implies in relation to those who do not share White group membership" (Rowe et al., 1994, pp. 133–134). While three (3) different types of unachieved white racial consciousness—avoidant, dependent, and dissonant—and four (4) types of achieved white racial consciousness—dominative, conflictive, reactive, and integrative—are identified, none of these archetypes properly account for the stage of racial consciousness where someone actively denies their whiteness nor do the models provide an explanation for how a white person moves between stages of white racial consciousness (Rowe et al., 1994). This could suggest that further research such as mine needs to continue investigating and expanding the field's understanding of white racial consciousness.

Marcus Bell (2017) examined white racial identity in the context of spaces where the majority of people are racialized and he argues that, in fact, white people in these spaces are

acutely aware of their whiteness and perceive themselves to be at odds with the general consensus that people of colour are constructed as always being the centre of racial victimization. This is to say that when white people find themselves as the minority group, their awareness of their minority presence in that space is intensified to the extent that they actively dispute the victimization of people of colour and redirect attention back to themselves (Bell, 2017). This relates to the work of Flynn who wrote that white fatigue, an experience unique to whiteness, is the result of white individuals perceiving themselves as being oversaturated by information about racism and discrimination experienced by people of colour (2015). He suggests that when considering whiteness and white racial identity development and white racial identity models, a consideration of white fatigue must be included to account for and control for the ways that white people experience discomfort and negative emotions when confronted with learning about racism (Flynn, 2015).

Ronald L. Jackson II (1999), a scholar in communication studies, used focus groups to interrogate whiteness as identity and identified five (5) characteristics of whiteness: "(1) incompletion; (2) uninterrogateable space; (3) metaphor for the universal insider; (4) guilty and fair space; and (5) situationally immutable" (1999, p. 38). The first characteristic was defined through the participants' inability to define whiteness, which suggested that whiteness was fragmented, and more importantly, that whiteness may be "understood to be more of an identification referent than a racial identity" (Jackson, 1999, p. 46). The second characteristic explained how whites never have to alter themselves or make accommodations, and can always anticipate being well-received. Jackson went so far as to say that white individuals "always have a choice" (1999, p. 48) when it comes to how they may opt to navigate their whiteness, invisibilize it, and weaponize it. With respect to the third characteristic, Jackson argued that the focus group participants assumed themselves to be "universal insiders" in their interactions with others, be they white or not. This in connection to the concept of uninterrogateable space would suggest that white people who may want to race-shift not only have the choice to do so because of their whiteness but are empowered to do so because of their presumptions of being "universal insiders." The penultimate characteristic explains how white people, as part of their whiteness, consider whiteness as available and sharable with anyone and everyone. This was determined by Jackson based on the focus group participants' affinity towards colourblind rhetoric such as the statement "we're all basically the same" which was repeated multiple times (1999, p. 49). Given that these interviews were done with students at Historically Black Universities, it would further imply that whites felt emboldened by their whiteness to enter spaces not designated for them. The last characteristic of whiteness, situational immutability, revealed how participants would *choose* when to code switch in the predominantly Black environment of their universities. If they felt comfortable and they *wanted* to code switch, then they would, and if they didn't feel comfortable then they didn't (Jackson, 1999). This would, along with the aforementioned characteristics, allude to the notion that whiteness can be abandoned or adhered to based on the convenience of the situation and the perceived benefits of doing so. Whiteness is therefore a concept which is not only socially constructed but seemingly also something which has no clear boundaries or requisites. Indeed, attempts at trying to determine what white racial identity *is* have not resulted in a straightforward consensus (Helms, 2017; McDermott & Samson, 2005; Rowe et al., 1994).

Hoelscher (2003) has provided an account of the history of whiteness and how it emerged in the collective consciousness. He writes that whiteness is a recent phenomenon that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as society increasingly subscribed to and believed in

social constructions of concepts such as race, place, gender, and class (Hoelscher, 2003). Housel later built on Hoelscher's work by arguing that whiteness remains an "unstable construct" (Housel, 2009, p. 132). In this sense, whiteness is perpetuated and retains its pervasive qualities because we continue to assign it a legitimacy in our everyday microgeographies. According to Housel, privileges are therefore bestowed upon whites not because of their race, but because their race as whites enables their *whiteness*, which itself influences power dynamics of space and access (2009).

Whiteness, as with other forms of identity, can be reached as an identity through the following stages: ascription, identification, and then treatment (Appiah, 2006). The formation of our identities and the ways we feel secure in those identities relates to the feeling discussed in ethics known as "eudaimonia" which refers to something which brings us happiness (Appiah, 2006). Considering how the formation of our identities can lead to eudaimonia, Telles and Flores (2013) have argued, interrogated, and complicated whiteness as a flexible identity which could explain the facility with which white individuals are able to attain eudaimonia through the reformation of their identities when it best suits them. Telles and Flores write that this "flexibility in racial classification permits us to examine identification as white as a sociological outcome that may vary according to social context rather than as a relatively fixed outcome" (2013, p. 413). For example, the authors contend that whiteness has been somewhat elusive in Western societies, while it has been much more explicit in Latin America. Their study suggests that while whiteness as a skin colour is more fixed and considered generally stable, whiteness as an identity is shaped by sociocultural and socioeconomic factors (Telles & Flores, 2013).

Indeed, whiteness, Haider argues, only began to truly emerge within the "American transition to capitalism" (2018, p. 46). In order to maintain the capitalist system, the State needed to divide labourers and maintain the status quo of exploitative (slave) labour, and so, the racial category of "white" emerged to allow Europeans to form an alliance with the capitalist State, distantiating themselves from Black and Brown workers for the promised social privileges of whiteness (Haider, 2018). Power, and more importantly, the *lack* or *absence* of power determines what opportunities an individual is afforded and to which group an individual is considered belonging. This very strict division of groups facilitates the state's function of controlling and regulating bodies, while concurrently determining which sorts of actions an individual can feasibly take without risking too much or being prevented from doing so by any number of socioeconomic barriers such as their status or wealth (Weber, 2009).

This redefining of people along racial lines represents a "watershed moment" that allows for new ways to think about race, class, and power (Haider, 2018). Essentially, a bargain was made between capitalism and the white working class: allow the continuation of Black exploitation in exchange for "certain social privileges" (Haider, 2018). Being white was a categorical identity which allowed for preferential treatment and access to resources that the newly defined Other, the African, could not advocate for (Haider, 2018). In order to maintain the division between labourers and maintain the status quo, capitalism began permitting other Europeans who were previously considered inferior–such as the Jews (Jacobson, 1998), the Irish (Roediger, 2007), and Italians (Vellon, 2014)–to join the ranks of whiteness (Haider, 2018). In order to integrate people who were once not seen as white, a social contract was put in place to affirm the new binary between white and black.

Similarly sociologist Charles W. Mills (1997) has proposed the theory of the "racial

social contract" as the implicit rules for behaviour which enable an individual (read: white) engaged in any particular racial contract to access privileges ascribed to the identity holders of that contract. The racial contract, therefore, assigns tangible assets to whiteness as an identity, allowing whiteness to shapeshift into a form of property. Critical race scholar, Cheryl Harris, reiterates whiteness as property as she writes that "the law has established and protected an actual property interest in whiteness itself, which shares the critical characteristics of property and accords with the many and varied theoretical descriptions of property" (Harris, 1993, p. 1724). Effectively, whiteness became a source of *status property* which contextualized identity as a tangible object that could be engaged to benefit from resources, access to space, and to accumulate more property (Harris, 1993). Additionally, as a form of property, whiteness became protected and could not be claimed by others, eventually becoming stratified by science that asserted that there was an "objective fact" to whiteness (Harris, 1993, p. 1738).

When whiteness is presumed as property it therefore exposes identity politics to the erroneous notion that if whiteness can be given and taken, so too can racialized identities be equipped onto one's person. As such, because whiteness functions as property, it follows that not only can it be invested into, but also that it is typically in white individuals' best interest to not divest from that whiteness and instead continue to propagate the notion that racial categories are definable and assignable (Lipsitz, 2006). Therefore, whiteness was becoming something socially tangible, as a form of social currency and cultural capital.

Social capital, or social currency, according to Bourdieu's model (as influenced by Marx's definition of capital), encompasses the concept of *capital* and expands it to include "all forms of power, whether they are material, cultural, social, or symbolic" (Yüksek, 2018, p. 1091). By deviating from Marx's model of capital to include cultural meanings, Bourdieu allows us to consider how capital can be accumulated socially in the form of "social opportunities via social interactions" (Yüksek, 2018, p. 1093). In this way, an individual can grow their social capital by gaining–or creating–new meaningful social connections, such as a racial identity (Yüksek, 2018). Taking the point that social capital can be produced based on racial identity, Nancy Leong complicates this notion with her own concept, *racial capitalism*. In her definition, racial capitalism refers to "the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person" (Leong, 2013, p. 2152).

Racial capitalism as a social system persists because racial identity has been commodified to the point where "a white individual [...] derives social or economic value from associating with individuals with nonwhite racial identities" (Leong, 2013, p. 2154). To think again of the ways in which white people would wish to abdicate or create White people's voluntary distancing from their whiteness, also relates to the concept of social capital. The term *identity performance* speaks to this phenomena as the move that people will make to "*re-present* themselves [...] to become acceptable to the society in which they live – a necessary representation that wields upon social capital" (Onyebuchi Eze, 2011, p. 300). That is, white people may seek to race-shift as a form of identity performance to gain access to new surpluses of social currency. Thinking back to the features of companies such as Ancestry and 23andMe, the fact that they each have a mobile application that users can download to have at the ready on their phones is demonstrative of these companies' awareness that consumers would be deploying their digital ancestry results in day-to-day life. Essentially, the genetic ancestry testing market is reaffirming the notion that racial or ethnic identity can be accepted as social tender, and as such, consumers would reasonably need to provide this "proof of payment" so frequently that a mobile app was recognized as critical to the user experience.

This is particularly dangerous for people of colour who are witnessing ostensibly white individuals enter racialized spaces under the guise of their newfound racial identities, as derived from direct-to-consumer genetic ancestry testing, and using their new identity as a commodity to access resources. Historically, as people of colour were being defined, so were white people defining themselves. Without ways to distinguish Africans, Indigenous people, and those of the so-called "Orient," white people were also not given any ways to understand themselves. This obstacle was easily avoided because the colonial imagination functioned in such a way that it was able to imagine itself as a distinct class of people that could be defined and identified in binary ways (Stoler, 1996). Ann Laura Stoler writes that the belief followed that "the boundaries separating colonizer from colonized were [...] self-evident and easily drawn" (1996, p. 112). In order to successfully marginalize and ostracize certain peoples, categories needed to be made vitally important so that the State could easily function within the framework of biopolitics to determine who could be included or should be excluded from society and its activities (Stoler, 1996). While this strategy initially seemed to make sense for early colonizers, they soon discovered that the bonds between groups were becoming increasingly ambiguous. While some efforts were made and certainly had an impact towards reifying the discrepancies and maintaining colonial order and rule, such as establishing laws around anti-miscegenation (Somerville, 1994), Stoler writes that "ultimately inclusion or exclusion required regulating the sexual, conjugal, and domestic life" (1996, p. 113). This was not applied only to racialized people, however, as the State understood that in order to continue perpetuating the myth of immutable difference and incompatibility, they needed to show the distinctions on both sides for the colonized but also the colonizer (Stoler, 1996).

If biopower and biopolitics refers to a specific form of social control whereby the State creates experts who build and define a science and body of knowledge which they control, this means they can convert their self-appointed expertise into a so-called divine right to define, identify, and classify peoples in order to transform them into manageable populations (Foucault, 1976). By producing categories of people, the State empowers itself to not only decide who is what, but they also use these identities to determine who gets to live and live-well, and who does not. In creating definitions and labels, the State was able to establish a regime of knowledge that, at first, classified individuals based on specific metrics and which eventually transformed to a self-governing model in which individuals of the State would "confess" and self-impose identity onto themselves (Foucault, 1976). Simultaneous to the emergence of self-identification, technologies of science and identity-making evolved and contributed to the body of knowledge now known as scientific racism (Somerville, 1994).

The history of scientific racism and the use of imperial positivist forms of knowledge is demonstrative of how privileged forms of knowledge and knowledge-making serve to subjugate the "other." Indeed, new forms of science and experts were being invented to explain and justify the disparities in the treatment of humans simultaneous to orientalism's creation of fantasy worlds which described new cultures and new peoples as entirely different from civilized society and the peoples of the so-called civilized world (Said, 1978). Despite the understanding today that the scientific distinctions between races was unfounded and is no longer a relevant nor appropriate basis on which to classify peoples (Fairbanks, 2015), the cultural enamoration with sciences and the promises of absolute, objective truths continues to persist and inform the ways that race is understood contemporarily. Vrushali Patel (2022) reminds us:

> The colonial and neocolonial structures of knowledge production, circulation, and distribution are ongoing and continue to have significant impact in terms of the size and direction of flows.

(Patil, 2022, p. 91)

As new technologies are developed to "unlock" one's ancestry through genetics, services which had traditionally been dedicated to tracing lineage through family trees and stories began to be replaced with contemporary scientific methods. As such, there are insidious ramifications for social organizing when positivist science is applied to the socio-political lives of people because of the tainted history of science which has traditionally positioned itself as "objective" despite being rooted in racism (Somerville, 1994).

Anthropologist and critical genealogy scholar, Kim TallBear (TallBear, 2013a, 2013b), writes about the ways in which our DNA is transformed into our racial identity. Along with sociologist and critical race scholar, Alonda Nelson (Nelson, 2016a, 2016b), TallBear illustrates the transition from legislation based on 'blood quantum' and the "one drop rule" towards a neoliberal conceptualization of science, race, and racial identity as being intimately intertwined and inextricably connected. While TallBear focuses her scholarship on claims of Indigeneity and Nelson focuses her work on Black Americans' desire to engage in genetic testing to develop a more secure sense of racial identity as a result of the diaspora caused by transatlantic slavery, neither speak directly to the issue of white individuals using direct-to-consumer genetic ancestry tests to race-shift and the impacts of this race-shifting. Both scholars, however, explain that people may seek out genetic testing because "genetic genealogy testing aligns with an enduring human desire: the search for roots and identity" (Nelson, 2016b, p. 64).

This complication by Nelson for why people may be interested in knowing their roots through DNA testing speaks to our confidence in science as a source of absolute truth and meaning-making and its ability to form an "us" and "them" dichotomy (Foucault, 1976; Stoler, 1996). Herein lies the fundamental danger of gene fetishism and whiteness as property because if we understand that whiteness is definable by science and that these conclusions from science can be deployed as "identity, status, and property" (Harris, 1993, p. 1725), then we can also consider that other forms of racialization may be exploited in the same way.

This deference to the science of genealogy points to the ability for DNA ancestry tests to be used as a vehicle to facilitate race-shifting. Critical race scholar Darryl Leroux's work has a tremendous amount of influence on understanding modes of *genealogical aspiration* (Nelson, 2016b) that govern the intentionality behind race-shifting. More precisely, his work considers how the structure of whiteness facilitates race's manipulation in a phenomenon he calls "race-shifting" (Leroux, 2018, 2019, 2020). Leroux has provided a framework to understand how people begin to facilitate race-shifting, describing the process as happening via one of three mechanics of descent; lineal, lateral, or aspirational (Leroux, 2019).

With lineal descent, a genealogical connection is made to an ancestor—typically a very distant one—and this ancestral connection serves as the starting point for the claims to identity that are made. On the other hand, lateral descent removes the need for a direct lineage and uses an imagined ancestor as the central anchoring point to their claimed identity. And lastly, aspirational descent refers to an imagined genealogical connection which has no real evidence to substantiate the claim to the identity the individual is shifting into (Leroux, 2019). Crucially, with aspirational descent, an individual does not even need proof of their Indigenous lineage, and instead, they can invent, imagine, or initiate their own Indigenous ancestry (Leroux, 2019). For Leroux, the aspirational mechanic of descent is centered on the *fantasy* of being Indigenous; sometimes due to the erroneous perception that being Indigenous grants you access to special privileges or because the individual discerns that it would be more acceptable or even fascinating to be of Indigenous descent (2019)

According to Leroux's work, when these mechanics of descent are mobilized, we can call this phenomenon race-shifting. He writes that descent itself is "a genealogical *practice* that involves *doing* something with one's ancestors" (Leroux, 2020, p. 94). As such, to practice race-shifting or to be a race shifter necessitates that the individual moves from one identity model to another after engaging with a catalyzing agent such as a desire for aspirational descent, a misunderstood story from a family member, or a faulty tracing of one's lineage (Leroux, 2019). Crucially, race-shifting entails an individual appropriating another racial identity, often for the purposes of aligning themself with their perceived right to claim an Indigenous identity (Leroux, 2019). Race-shifting is often unfounded and typically involves more than just an acknowledgement of genetic ancestry, but a complete shift from one identity to another that is claimed both genetically but also culturally.

Leroux's work does not stand alone, and he himself draws on the work of Alondra Nelson (2016a, 2016b) and KimTall Bear (2013a, 2013b). Nelson, who has written extensively on critical genealogy studies, in her work, *The Social Life of DNA*, opens her chapter "The Pursuit of African Ancestry" by stating that "genetic genealogy testing aligns with an enduring human desire: the search for roots and identity" (2016a, p. 64). Nelson explains that this desire to supposedly *know* one's ancestry–to *discover* "it"–comes from an eagerness to "fulfill distinctive genealogical aspirations" (2016a, p. 67). This echoes Leroux's concept of aspirational descent in that both scholars are pointing to a phenomenon where individuals wish to have their "truths" unlocked and revealed to them (Leroux, 2019). Nelson expands on her argument by describing the reasons for attempting to fulfil their genealogical aspirations as being linked to a desire to corroborate their assumptions of ancestral lineage or be able to have a new association to a multicultural background they otherwise did not have prior to taking an ancestry test (2016a).

Nelson warns that ancestry tests are being sold with the pitch that they have the scientific capabilities to tell consumers not only where they are from, but what this means and therefore "who" they are as people (2016a). This claim to be able to provide answers to identity, a social construct in many ways as we have already seen (Foucault, 1976), brings our attention back to the ways that experts are co-constructed and co-created by the State with the population's permission and submission to positivist, scientific absolutes (Somerville, 1994; Stoler, 1996). Therefore, given that "identity and self-making are primary ambitions" (Nelson, 2016b, p. 69), we must interrogate what kinds of aspirations are being sold to consumers and how these products of aspiration are being mobilized and weaponized by white consumers to race-shift.

Importantly, when considering the elements contributing to white peoples' use of direct to consumer genetic ancestry tests to create a new racial identity, Kim TallBear places emphasis on the concept of "gene fetishism." Developed by critical scholar Donna Haraway, gene fetishism represents a socially constituted process by which DNA and *the* gene becomes "a fixed, seemingly objective thing" (TallBear, 2013b, p. 70). As a fixed structure, its position can be imposed onto others by experts as well as reinforced by society at large. What Haraway does in defining gene fetishism this way is she borrows from the work of Marx and his theory of commodity fetishism and expands on this concept to consider the ways in which genes have also been conflated to represent a particularity beyond science. As was Marx's argument, fetishism of either commodities but also of genes, contorts that object to the point where they "become transcendent" and "become signs in and of themselves" (TallBear, 2013b, p. 70). TallBear takes the foundational work of Marx as well as Haraway's contributions and asks the reader to consider how the transcendence of genes is a threat to how we construct racial identity contemporarily and—more specific to her research—on Native American DNA.

For TallBear, the commodification of DNA through processes such as gene fetishism results in a weakening of sovereignty claims for Indigenous peoples because the belief in absolute objectivity displaces the capacity for complex historical and social considerations (TallBear, 2013b). This perspective on gene fetishism reveals how the commodification of a science can expose Indigenous people to a social entrapment where acknowledging genetic ancestry testing reinforces the creation of experts on Indigeneity while simultaneously risking that a dismissal of genetic-based claims to Indigenous identity would propagate the erasure of Indigenous people whose claims to Indigeneity are not recognized otherwise (TallBear, 2013a).

Due to the science of racial identification being historically rooted in scientific racism, race itself has been locked into a discourse and rhetoric which already presumes that the answers are contained within the field of "objective" science (Harris, 1993). Indeed, TallBear explains how the process of extrapolating geographical information from DNA is made possible by Ancestry Informative Markers (AIMs) which use a form of comparative science to determine ancestry by comparing one individual's genetic sequence with a larger-scale reference bank of data that has already been mapped by genealogists (TallBear, 2013b). What becomes difficult to discern necessarily is the accuracy of these results as they are, for one, a prediction, and two, based on the researchers' biases when establishing the categories and labels of each genetic expression (TallBear, 2013b). Again, Cheryl Harris reminds us that included in the armory of tools bestowed upon those who possess and occupy whiteness is the power to define and control the construction and maintenance of other identities (1993). This ability to define who is what racial identity exposes identity politics to a mechanic in which whiteness is allowed to define the other (Reardon & TallBear, 2012).

TallBear theorizes that, beyond even blood—which she says is more symbolic than scientific—the study of our genes and chromosomes is a particularly insidious channel through which our identities become constituted (2013b), reiterating George Stocking and James Clifford's claim that race has almost always been a scientific project. TallBear summarizes Stocking and Clifford's discussion of the emergence of scientific racism, writing that "rather than individuals simply being classified into different races, race itself became the chief explanation for observed human differences" (TallBear, 2013b, p. 33). Gene fetishism has paved the way for race to be transformed into an identity for social and practical purposes. This colluding between gene fetishism and white racial identity and its particular ability to be treated as property, I argue, enables the facilitation of race-shifting insofar as race's *ownable* quality gives rise to people equipping various racial identities based on convenience.

The example of Elizabeth Warren, who decidedly race-shifted to a claim of *both* "Cherokee ancestry and identity" comes to mind (Leroux, 2020, p. 100). Leroux brings our attention additionally to the trope that Warren utilized to race-shift, which was to claim that her connection to Indigenous ancestry supposedly originated in her matriarchal line (2020). This trope is quite common indeed, known as the "Indian grandmother" or "Indian princess" trope and has been exposed for the way it allows white settlers to move away from any culpability for the actions of American colonizers and settlers (Tuck & Yang, 2012). In fact, white people frequently make efforts to distance themselves from whiteness as a response to their discomfort when they are confronted with their privileges and moreso, the sources of those privileges (DiAngelo, 2018).

According to Weber, the privileged group does not recognize itself as privileged because of the way society itself has been structured to favour themselves more than others, but rather because they perceive themselves as being endowed almost with a divine right to "beauty and

excellence" (Weber, 2009, p. 145). As such, they believe that their advantages are products of their work, actions, and embodiments as privileged members of a community. When this belief is challenged and the systems which produce their privileges are exposed, the fragility of whiteness is revealed and white people experience an acute sense of discomfort in this vulnerability (DiAngelo, 2018). White fragility is a social phenomena that occurs when the *white equilibrium* is disrupted; as in their sense of "racial comfort, centrality, superiority, entitlement, racial apathy, and obliviousness" is troubled in some way (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 130).

Critical race scholar, Robin DiAngelo, argues that when white equilibrium is threatened, the common reaction of white people is to try and protect the equilibrium or restore it as quickly as possible because they have not built a tolerance or emotional capacity to manage and self-regulate racial discomfort (2018). In order to establish their sense of white equilibrium, social power is wielded which takes advantage of "historical and institutional power and control" (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 130). Here, white privilege is granting persons the ability to direct conversations away from themselves to deflect or assuage any racial stress; something possible only because privilege "is associated with the mobilization of social power and the legitimization of authority for that which is privileged" (Vodde, 2000, p. 142). Thinking back to the social legitimacy endowed to the science of racial identity, white people are granted a particular amount of racial freedom to both simultaneously make claims to whiteness but also to other racial identities as a measure for mitigating their racial impacts.

Another way that white people may avoid racial discomfort is by engaging in a colourblind racism rhetoric in an attempt to exonerate themselves from their white privilege and position as the 'oppressor.' One strategy for doing so is to "disarticulate" oneself from whiteness and assume a neutral, raceless position; as simply an individual without a race, class, status, gender, sexuality, or any other identity marker. George Yancy wrote in an edited collection edited by Bergo and Nicholls that white people can do this by understanding themselves "as simply individuals, autonomous and nondescript, that is, interchangeable with anyone else (2011, p. 109). Indeed, research has indicated that people may adopt colour blindness as an identity in and of itself (Hartmann et al., 2017). This may indicate that for white people, by first inhabiting a colour blind identity as an intermediary position, the transition of race-shifting from whiteness into a racialized identity is less jarring and becomes more harmonious with their white equilibrium. Furthermore, because privilege can be seen as "a legitimization of one's entitlement to resources" and "as permission to escape or avoid any challenges to this entitlement" (Vodde, 2000, p. 144), a real danger exists that white people may be race-shifting in an attempt to move towards innocence and/or mitigate white fragility.

Decolonial feminist scholars Tuck and Yang have offered six (6) settler moves towards innocence to explain the phenomena of white settlers distancing themselves from culpability in colonialism (2012). They are: settler nativism; fantasizing adoption; colonial equivocation; conscientization; at risk-ing/asterisk-ing Indigenous peoples; and re-occupation and urban homesteading (Tuck & Yang, 2012). In the first model, settler nativism, an Indigenous ancestor is located and made into a key point in an individual's genetic history, culture, and subsequent identity formation. Here, a person making a claim to an Indigenous identity would be attempting to absolve themselves of any guilt or responsibility from colonial injustices (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The desire to associate oneself with Indigeneity can be argued to draw parallels with the same desire to have a proximate relationship to and with Blackness, where a person is considered somehow less culpable for harms caused because of their self-declared affiliation to an oppressed group (Eligon, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The second move is the settler adoption fantasy,

where settlers become enamored by the cultural beauty and "magnificence" of Indigenous practices and appropriate Indigenous practices to become Indigenous without actually having to become Indigenous or share any particular hardships and impacts of systemic marginalization (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Under this process, settlers will attempt to appropriate the culture—and sometimes even, the pain and trauma—of Indigenous peoples to absolve themselves by proximity. The third form is colonial equivocation and this represents the way in which members of other minority groups other than Indigenous peoples try to compare their struggles to the struggles of colonized Indigenous peoples. In these circumstances, it is not uncommon to find other people of colour or queer people attempting to "join" the struggle alongside Indigenous peoples without recognizing the role that they themselves play in continuing to perpetuate colonization (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Similarly, the drawing of (egregious) connections between their own experiences of "oppression" as not only parallel but equivocal is meant to disguise their endeavour to minimize their own culpability. Fourthly, the belief that by freeing one's mind they can liberate all facets of life is a rhetoric that gets employed which presumes that by decolonizing the mind, the work of decolonization is complete. Often, this removes the onus of acting and actively countering colonization efforts, along with any personal responsibility to aid in decolonization efforts because the agency is framed as exhausted at the point of internal decolonization (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Conscientization says that by decolonizing the mind, our personal responsibility ends there, permitting settlers to do very little meaningful and impactful work to decolonize formal institutions of oppression and colonization (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The fifth move to innocence is to re-invent Indigenous people as either a niche at-risk population, practically all but extinct from "modern" society; or to include Indigenous people in the imaginary expanse of asterisks where they are not properly recognized nor considered in meaningful and impactful ways, yet because they are still technically being included, accusations of exclusion are weakened (Tuck & Yang, 2012). By relegating Indigenous peoples to the farthest corners of our mind, the process of erasure is facilitated with little concern for guilt (think: out of sight, out of mind). Lastly, re-occupation and homesteading presuppose that land is property and can be "reclaimed" or "repossessed" by the masses who want to rise against the State. In this move to innocence, movements such as "Occupy Wall Street" argue that land and wealth should be given "back" to the 99%, to whom the land does not belong to; and nor does it *belong* to anyone because land should not be considered ownable (Tuck & Yang, 2012). While these moves to innocence manifest primarily for white settlers in the context of Indigenous struggles, I would argue that these same mechanics occur within race-shifting dynamics because of the inherent interest attached to being uniquely racialized (while still getting to be white) which would necessitate first an illusionary detachment from whiteness.

Not only has whiteness been used as a form of social capital but, contemporarily, the ability to galvanize whiteness as a form of immutable privilege has also meant that those outside of whiteness can face an increased risk for violence because of their lack of this form of social capital. Despite this, I would argue that there has been an emergence of white people choosing to mobilize based on their results from commercially available genetic ancestry tests to start occupying spaces which have been intentionally reserved for those who experience lived experiences of racialization and the racism that comes with being seen as a black or brown body. As Weber explains, each status group has a certain amount of privileges afforded to them that members of each community can decide amongst each other how to allocate, often with external influence from the state (Weber, 2009). When a more privileged individual occupies space in a more disadvantaged and disenfranchised stand, they are effectively stealing resources from the

latter group while continuing to benefit from the privileges of their former group. Because status and class is often assigned based on visible indicators which have been socially constructed and assigned, ethnicity continues to be assessed and delegated based on particular socioeconomic clues which society agrees upon and that the state imposes (Weber, 2009).

Methodology

My research focuses on the emerging phenomenon of ostensibly white individuals "discovering" their non-white genetic ancestry through results provided by commercially available, direct-to-consumer DNA tests. In considering the ways in which these genetic ancestry DNA tests are being used as vehicles for the dissociation away from whiteness and white racial identity, my work draws from critical genealogy studies and critical race studies and concerns itself with the sociological impacts of white individuals' race-shifting. My research asks the following three questions: (1) how are white individuals using direct-to-consumer ancestry tests to interpret their own whiteness and racial identity; (2) why are white people seemingly seeking to adopt a racial identity other than white; and (3) what are the impacts and consequences for communities of colour when white people use genetic ancestry test results to race-shift? As such, my research will think about race-shifting and genetic ancestry to interrogate the violence of whiteness, race-shifting, and the weaponization of one's purported racialized identity to manifest claims for access to spaces and resources.

In employing a mixed methodological approach, my research analyses qualitative data from five (5) individual, semi-structured, open-ended interviews in conjunction with an analysis of twenty-five (25) YouTube videos featuring individuals reacting to their genetic ancestry DNA test results. The approach applied to my research originates primarily from grounded theory that allows feminist researchers such as myself, to consider their research from a socially situated point of view that takes into account the social realities of experience and encourages the researcher to consider their own positionality (Harding, 1992; Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). The benefit of using grounded theory as not only a methodological but also a theoretical approach is that it allows us to think contextually about and around the data we are analysing so that we can consider the world around what is being coded (Charmaz, 2006). Clarke also argues for the strength of grounded theory by emphasising the ways in which situational analysis and standpoint theory can both contribute to creating a rigorous study that takes into account knowledges which have traditionally been seen as subjective and inappropriate in research (Clarke, 2005).

By doing theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), I develop a framework for analysing my data which will then be analysed as social phenomena via a situational analysis. This will facilitate a consideration of social arenas and how they, in turn, can inform the social formation and transformation of identities (Clarke, 2005). This approach is particularly useful given that my research is centered around the ways in which people navigate their social identities; it allows me to investigate the discourses of identity through a grounded theory framework (Charmaz, 2006). The interviews were conducted virtually via teleconference using the free online video calling service, Zoom. Due to the widespread popularity of Zoom catalysed by the Covid-19 global pandemic at the time of my research collection phase, the likelihood that my research participants would be familiar with Zoom was highly probable. This reduced the chances that a lack of technological literacy could impede a potential research subject from participating in the study. Using Zoom as the digital platform to conduct all of my interviews had

the additional advantage of including a free screen sharing feature that allowed my interviewees to share their genetic ancestry test results with me directly. Including a screen share component to my interview methodology allowed me to gain a better sense of how individuals are interpreting their results based on the presentation of their ancestry by the DNA testing companies. Ultimately, this revealed elements of their ancestry which interviewees portrayed subjectively; often disregarding certain elements of their results while overstating or overemphasising other aspects .

Initially, my research plan involved me collecting qualitative data through a total of ten (10) interviews, where five (5) of the interviews would be conducted with my video camera as the researcher enabled and five (5) of the interviews would be conducted with my video camera as the researcher disabled. Understanding how the social-acceptability bias can influence participants' responses for fear of being socially offensive or unacceptable in their answers (Krumpal, 2013), and how the race of researchers impacts race-related research (Twine et al., 2000; Williams et al., 1995; Young, 2004) led to my decision to neither disclose nor reveal my racial identity for half (5 out of 10) of the interviews I conducted by disabling my video camera during those interviews. This is otherwise known as the "race of interviewer" effect (Bowman, 2007; Cotter et al., 1982; Hatchett & Schuman, 1975). Indeed, social desirability is often attributed as the cause for white interviewees "to tailor their answers" in order to present a more socially acceptable version of themselves to the researcher when discussing the subject of race (Bowman, 2007, p. 1). As a person of colour interviewing white participants, I attempted to mitigate the "race of interviewer" effect by not disclosing my racial positionality to interviewees to control for the way that white respondents provide more liberal responses when interviewed by a researcher of colour (Hatchett & Schuman, 1975).

Notwithstanding my concerns of the social-acceptability bias' affectation of my interviewees willingness to speak candidly about their racial identity with myself as a visibly racialized Chinese researcher, I was only able to conduct one (1) interview where the participant was seemingly unaware of my racial identity. This is the result of multiple factors. First, using the snowball method meant that there was a higher probability of acquaintanceship with the researcher. Second, the nature of the subject decreased the likelihood that participants would want to expose themselves to the discomfort of discussing their racial identity regardless of whether they knew my race or not. Additionally, using the snowball method to reach my target population and relying on convenience sampling for participation, may present the liability of my study's recruitment method being influenced on volunteer bias. Volunteer bias can suggest that the data obtainable from those who would want to participate in the study may differ from the data of those who would not have been as proactive to participate (Shantikumar & Barratt, 2018). Subsequently, I conducted five (5) interviews in total from the ten (10) I had originally intended to execute; and of these, four (4) were aware of my racial identity prior to being interviewed by me. All of the interviews were transcribed, coded, and analysed using situational analysis as outlined in grounded theory, irrespective of whether or not the interviewee was aware of my racial identity. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to interpret and ascertain meaning from the responses of my research participants (Mullet, 2018) in conjunction with situational analysis in order to contextualise the social context of the interviewees.

Prior to conducting my interviews, I conducted a preliminary analysis of eleven (11) different YouTube videos featuring a total of fifteen (15) individuals–who I believed to be white based on the images of themselves on their video thumbnails–reacting and commenting on the results of their genetic ancestry DNA results. Upon interpreting the video data using a relational

analysis, I performed a theoretical comparison with my preliminary data to help inform my interview guide's development. Having a theoretical comparison assisted in the process of analysing the various themes present in white race-shifters' discourse as analysable phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Postliminary to completing my five (5) interviews, I analysed an additional ten (10) YouTube videos featuring individuals discussing their test results, for a total of twenty-five (25) YouTube videos. Overall, all of the YouTube videos were viewed, transcribed, and coded using visual situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) within the framework of grounded and standpoint theory as discussed previously.

Following Clarke's epistemology on mapping visual discourses, working with visual materials as a focus of my analysis involved a quadripartite process of deciding, locating, collecting, and tracking (2005). For deciding and locating, I identified YouTube as an optimal source for visual materials because of the way that many YouTube video bloggers (vloggers) interact with their audiences when sharing their experiences on the second most visited website in the world (Christin & Lewis, 2021). YouTube has become a site of cultural production where bloggers sharing curated moments of their lives are quickly transformed by fans into perceived experts (Mironova, 2016). Furthermore, in the context of media studies, applying content analysis, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis remain relevant and fitting for the purposes of my research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nieborg et al., 2020).

Having decided on the platform, YouTube, and locating the content, the videos, I moved to collecting and tracking the content I would be analysing. Tracking was of little concern because videos on YouTube are easily viewed, saved, and downloaded compared to tracking down traditional media such as photos. For collecting, I selected which YouTube videos I would analyse based on whether the *locating memos* I made for each video suited the scope of my research project. Locating memos "describe how this image fits into the situation of inquiry" (Clarke, 2005, p. 19). which I determined based on the thumbnails of each YouTube video. The search terms I used to find the videos were "ancestry results," "ancestry dna results," "dna ancestry results," "dna result reaction," "dna test results reaction," "dna test result 23 and me," "23andme results," and "myheritage dna results." Using these search terms allowed me to take advantage of multiple keywords per search in order to optimise the results and focus the videos specifically on people reacting to their genetic ancestry test results. Based on Clarke's (2005) conceptualisation of *big picture memos,* and more precisely, *first impressions*–my initial impressions and observations–I selected videos based on the video titles, the video thumbnails, and whether or not I believed the vlogger would have identified as white prior to receiving their genealogy test results. Once I had identified a large pool of potential videos to use for content analysis, I watched very short segments of each video in order to discern whether or not the YouTube video contained the vlogger directly commenting on and sharing their feelings towards their test results. In cases where the vlogger (a) presented their results but did not share their thoughts in relation to their results; (b) provided a product review of a given direct-to-consumer DNA test but did not share their thoughts in relation to their results; or (c) parodied, commented on, or otherwise discussed other YouTube reaction videos, I did not retain the videos for full content analysis as it was not considered as being within the scope of my research. Ultimately, videos that were collected past the first impressions filtering were catalogued with their original video link, video title, and video thumbnail. All the videos were transcribed and coded to identify potential patterns or recurring themes across the videos.

In order to meaningfully include the content of the YouTube video thumbnails as part of my overall discussion, I employed thematic analysis when considering the presentation of the

videos in my sample. In order to drive engagement with their videos, people filming and publishing YouTube videos will typically promote their content through the use of catchy video titles and catchier video thumbnails. Koh and Cui wrote that "visual attributes of thumbnails have statistically significant relations with the view-through of videos" (2022, p. 5), which they suggest indicates that the visual elements of a video's thumbnail are a key factor in whether or not a viewer will watch a video or not. The content and visual presentation of the YouTube video thumbnails in my sample were visually analyzed to see how, if at all, the elaboration likelihood model could provide insight into how certain race-shifting fantasies were being espoused by the thumbnails to drive view-through. The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) maps how peoples' attitudes can be persuaded and altered by a given stimuli (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). For the purposes of my research, I will be considering how the ELM can apply to the visual presentation of YouTube video thumbnails and extend to priming the audience's perceptions and lead to a more biased viewing of the video content.

Discussion

YouTube themes

Common across the videos that I watched were six central motifs: (1) people expressed a disappointment in their whiteness; (2) people expressed a desire to be part of the Other; (3) people perpetuated racial stereotypes and assigned themselves benefits based on perceived positive stereotypes; (4) people were using a non-ordinal method of hierarchizing the information they discussed with the viewer; (5) people used their test results as the vehicle to race-shift via lineal descent; and lastly (6) people used their test results as a vehicle to race-shift via lateral descent. Across all of the videos I analyzed, at least one of these six elements was present in the discourse of each video.

Speaking to the first two themes, they both relate to orientalism as there was a fetishization of the Other and a simultaneous assumption that whiteness was the default, standard, or neutral position for racial and ethnic identity. This invisibilization of whiteness contributed, in my opinion, to the people in the videos feeling a sense of disappointment when their test results featured (to any degree) European ancestry. Likewise, the perceived hyper-visibility of racialized identities by white people is likely responsible for the excitement and overzealousness expressed by people in the videos when their test results featured (to any degree) non-European ancestry.

In *BuzzFeed Video*'s "The Try Guys Take an Ancestry DNA Test," one of the men featured in the video, Zach, learns that he is 99.6% European. This is broken down further as including Ashkenazi Jewish, Finnish, and either Iberian or Italian ancestry (2017). When prompted to share how he felt about his results he responded by asking "Is it weird that I'm [like] disappointed that I don't have more of a mix?" (BuzzFeedVideo, 2017). It can be inferred here that the 'mix' that Zach is wishing he had has nothing to do with the mix of white European ancestry he was already told about, but about a desire (fetish) for lineage from the global south. The fantasy of some white Europeans is to have origin stories that are unique, and most importantly, absolve them of guilt related to past colonial injustices. Tuck and Yang have explained how settlers want to move away from whiteness (2012), so when they are confronted with what they perceive as irrefutable scientific evidence that they cannot become as distant as

they would want to, this causes a grief that is expressed through profound disappointment. Specifically, I argue that they are grieving their inability to weaponize settler nativism (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Calling back to Eligon's work, people want to be as close to non-whiteness as possible to feel as non-racist as possible (2019). It follows logically that white people would claim to be non-white if they could just to be as oppositional to whiteness as they could.

Data no.	Year	Video Title	European results	Non-European results
#01	(2018)	I Took A DNA Ancestry Test...	86.5%	12.4%
#02	(2019)	DNA TEST RESULTS WERE UNEXPECTED - I'M BLACK + GUESS WHAT	84%	16%
#03	(2018)	READING MY ANCESTRY DNA RESULTS! I BEEN LIED TO MY ENTIRE LIFE!	87%	13%
#04	(2017)	The Try Guys Take An Ancestry DNA Test	Zach: 99.6% Keith: 99.8% Ned: 99.9%	Zach: 0.3% Keith: <0.3% Ned: 0.1%
#05	(2019)	DNA RESULTS (EMOTIONAL) | 23 AND ME	52.8%	44.2%
#06	(2020)	Mixed Girl Takes a DNA Test! Finding out the TRUTH.. 23andMe DNA Test	64.2%	29.2%
#07	(2020)	Racially/Ethnically Ambiguous Girl Takes an Ancestry DNA Test: Shocking Results	88.4%	11.6%
#08	(2018)	White girl very confused by DNA results | Ancestry DNA	61%	24%
#09	(2020)	We took a DNA test and the results were surprising!	Gabriel: 57.9% Marina: 70%	Gabriel: 41.4% Marina: 30%
#10	(2021)	I Did A DNA Test... (I Guess Im Cancelled Now)	100%	0%
#11	(2018)	DNA TEST RESULTS?!?! | 23&Me	77.2%	21.6%
#12	(2021)	REACTING TO MY ANCESTRY DNA RESULTS	100%	0%
#13	(2022)	So My DNA Test Results Came In...	99.5%	0.5%
#14	(2022)	I Took an Ancestry DNA Test...	100%	0%
#15	(2019)	Am I really ITALIAN? - MyHeritage DNA test results	100%	0%
#16	(2018)	23andMe Ancestry + Health | I'm 6.9% WHAT?! | COMPREHENSIVE RESULTS + REVIEW	77.5%	19.1%
#17	(2022)	i took a 23 and me genetics test.. SHOCKING RESULTS.	100%	0%
#18	(2022)	Shocking DNA test results! // 23 and Me Review	72.7%	27.1%
#19	(2022)	Learning of my African Heritage!	Nia: 100% Sam: 90.7%	Nia: 0% Sam: 9.3%

#20	(2021)	I'M AFRICAN?! - MyHeritage DNA RESULTS	93.3%	4.7%
#21	(2019)	I took a DNA Test to see where I'm from	57.4%	40.6%
#22	(2021)	my dna results | 23andMe	89.6%	9.1%
#23	(2018)	SHOCKED BY OUR DNA RESULTS! | MyHeritage DNA Kit	Sofia: 64% Emilio: 76.2%	Sofia: 36% Emilio: 23.8%
#24	(2018)	My Life Is A Lie - MyHeritage DNA Test Results - I'm Not Who I Thought I Was	100%	0%
#25	(2022)	ANCESTRY DNA | MY SHOCKING RESULTS	100%	0%

Table 3. Rate of European vs non-European results of YouTubers[2]

Another person from a YouTube video featured on the channel *Phil's World* shares Zach's sentiment when he says of his experience taking a genetic ancestry test that "I'm a little bit disappointed because I wanted to see something more about, I don't know, more about other countries" (Phil's World, 2019). Lauren Elloise from the titular YouTube channel, *Lauren Elloise*, was already anticipating feeling unimpressed by her results. Before reading her test results and reacting to them for the first time in front of the camera she said "It's just going to be so boring, European" (Lauren Elloise, 2021). Comments like these heavily imply that people are taking commercially available genetic ancestry tests in order to be able to distance themselves from whiteness, if not outright to approximate themselves to people of colour given their disappointment when they realize they can't do what they seemingly hoped to do had the results been of a different (more ethnically "diverse" nature).

In fact, a number of the people I observed in the videos actively wanted to be able to identify as the Other and voiced this desire when discussing their expectations and hopes for the results they would have. As Nelson (2016b) said on the topic of genealogical aspiration, people will seek out ways to validate their fantasies for multiculturalism in an attempt to form an identity. Roth and Ivemark reference the work of Hughey (2012) in defining 'colour capital' as "the objects, discourses, or people viewed as nonwhite" which white people distinctly lack (Roth & Ivemark, 2018, p. 158). Again, Harris' work is echoed here as white people continue to view their race as property, and by extension, all races as ownable and exploitable for individual gain (1993). Roth and Ivemark speculate that "the desire for color capital to offset feelings of guilt or white blandness offers an additional reason to explain whites' aspirations for new racial identities" (2018, p. 158) which is complementary to Tuck and Yang's illustration of motivations for settler moves to innocence (2012). Hughey wrote that "Whites frequently demonstrate concurrent feelings of normativity and superiority, coupled with self perceptions of racial emptiness and longing for contact with non-Whites" (2012, p. 170) and this phenomenon can result in many white people placing an exorbitant amount of value into how their results will impact their lives moving forward. Before opening up his results page, YouTuber Matthew said to the audience: "I'm really nervous. This day actually will change my life forever. It just will. I will forever know what I am, what I am supposed to be" (Mizkif, 2022). I found that the high stress nature of 'discovering' one's ancestry was frequently fueled by a strong desire to have non-white results, as well as being coupled with unrealistic expectations for having vibrant (read: positive) migration stories that would exemplify the non-whiteness of their history.

[2] Totals may not combine to 100% where DNA was left unassigned.

DayWithPhae's channel features the YouTuber reacting with excitement, saying that it's "so cool," upon seeing that her results showed she was 0.2% "African hunter-gatherer" (2018). She went on to say that she appreciated the way that the test results–in her case from 23andMe–helped her to understand where she was really from, although she also remarked that the realization of her ancestry upset her to a certain extent because it likely meant there was a dark history behind why she would have African ancestry.

> This makes me feel [like] super happy because I'm so [like] multicultural, and I'm like the definition of a melting pot. But then at the same time, it makes me really sad because it's like my multicultural bringing, in a lot of ways, comes from really sad parts.
> (DayWithPhae, 2018)

The video of the Try Guys painted a similar picture when Keith said of his African results that he " thought this was real cool until I remembered what the British were doing in the 1700s. And now I'm thinking it's less cool" (BuzzFeedVideo, 2017). There was a clear cognitive dissonance between the desire displayed by white people to be diverse while simultaneously exhibiting a reticence and discomfort with what often accompanies the type of 'diversity' they are seeking out. This continues to further support my argument that white people are only interested in the superficiality of diversity, and not the real world consequences of marginalization nor do they want any burdens which would accompany intergenerational trauma.

Regarding the attribution of stereotypes when considering results, it was notable to me how common the occurrence was of people who would openly (read: cavalierly) perpetuate stereotypes they held regarding different races and ethnicities. In the majority of cases where European ancestry was being stereotyped, those featured in the videos appear to self-console themselves by affirming aloud to both themself and the viewer why certain ancestry results were actually 'cool' and therefore not boring or disappointing. In a few instances, however, the disappointment in European ancestry would result in outbursts where the relevant European ethnic group would be disparaged.

On the other hand when considering how non-European ancestry results were stereotyped, the perceptions of ethnic groups was often limited by the video creator's (alarmingly frequent) ignorance of the group in any meaningful ways beyond surface-level stereotypes and prejudices. Dangerously, many people featured in the videos who were self-congratulating themselves for having non-European ancestry also expressed being excited to potentially reap the 'benefits' of having minority status. While one may have guessed that an ulterior motive of white people taking genetic ancestry tests was so that they could race-shift to receive the benefits they may believe themselves as lacking, it is perhaps shocking that they would admit it as blatantly as they did in some cases.

It may be relevant to note that in many of the videos analyzed, people were mispronouncing geographical areas or misunderstanding their results altogether. There was a naivety at best, and ignorance at worst, when it came to how people discussed some of their results in videos. In *Kate Dee*'s video she continually mispronounced part of her results as being "indigeous" and later exclaimed that she was Nepalese by saying "I'm Nepal!" (Kate Dee, 2019). Jennifer Fix of the YouTube channel bearing the same name admitted that she didn't "know where that is" upon learning that she had Ashkenazi Jewish lineage as she mistook it for a country's name (Jennifer Fix, 2018). The content creator featured on the channel *Mizkif* was also unfamiliar with Ashkenazi Jews, first calling them "Azaknacky" and then "Ashcannasi" before getting the name right (Mizkif, 2022). In another example, a video from *ARI TV* shows the

YouTuber repeatedly mispronounce the Baltic States as the "balistic" states and refer to people who are Spanish as being "Spain" people (ARI TV, 2018).

I observed that in a lot of the videos, people employed the many stereotypes they held towards people of different ethnicities in at least one of three ways. Firstly, some would rely on stereotypes they had learned in order to confirm or dispute results they were receiving in general, be it European or non-European ancestry. Second, some would use positive stereotypes about white Europeans in order to consolidate their disappointment regarding results they got in order to make things seem more exciting or desirable. Third, some would draw seemingly irrelevant connections to their personal interests, likes and dislikes, or other personality traits to reinforce their non-European results. Ostensibly, the third use of stereotypes is necessary for many people as their sole tool for validating their non-white identity in the face of potential scrutiny or denial. In fact, many people already predicted that they would not be believed and that they would need to use their test results to prove definitively that they weren't *just* white.

Jiffy Morales, who throughout her video expressed a simultaneous desire to learn who she was alongside a desire to be non-white, argued that the result showing she was 0.7% Italian was nonsensical because she didn't like Italian food with marinara sauce, nor did she like pizza (Jiffy Morales, 2020). On the other hand, many positive stereotypes about Europeans were said seemingly to self-reassure oneself about their white test results. YouTuber *Chakir* said of his 1.8% Scandinavian ancestry that it was "still pretty cool" because he would get to call himself a viking (Chakir, 2019). Another YouTuber, *PewDiePie*, also came to accept his results saying he was from Norway when he decided that meant he could be a viking.

> No! Norway? I have Norway in me?! Ugh! (imitated spitting and vomiting sounds) Fucking Norway! Nordland! (imitated spitting and vomiting sounds) Wait, [...] didn't the vikings actually come from Norway? So that means I actually have viking DNA? Yeah! Let's go, this is what I'm talking about!
> (PewDiePie, 2021)

Kate Dee, a woman, also commented on her Norwegian results. Interestingly, instead of making reference to vikings which may be seen as a more masculine aspiration, she celebrates her result by saying she could now become a model (Kate Dee, 2019).

As for the concern that some YouTubers expressed about being believed, both Jiffy Morales and Kate Dee worried that people would not accept them nor believe them respectively (2020; 2019). In order to mitigate these feelings, some videos showed how people were already finding ways to explain their ancestry, or even to earn their new racial identity. When *Chakir* discovered that he had a combined 5.7% ancestry between Spain and Portugal, he immediately said he should start to learn Spanish (Chakir, 2019). Moreover, as a way to authenticate her Nepalese ancestry,[3] Kate Dee says it makes sense because of a trip she took to Indonesia. In reference to having Nepalese ancestry she said:

> That's a country close to India and they believe in like Buddhism and Hinduism, and I've always felt like a strong connection towards that religion. And the first time I went to Indonesia, [...] that's crazy! No wonder I felt such a strong connection when I was there.
> (Kate Dee, 2019)

[3] The percentage of Nepalese ancestry is not given by the YouTuber, however, we can assume it is less than 9% but more than 3% as those figures are given for the preceding and subsequent ethnic groups listed in her results (2019).

In this instance, not only did the YouTuber appear to refer to Buddhism and Hinduism as a singular religion, but she talked about the religion as being practiced in India, and spoke specifically of her time as a tourist in Indonesia. To all appearances, this would imply that she did not recognize the difference between the countries of India and Indonesia; all while explaining why it made sense for her to be Nepalese nonetheless.

Lastly, outside of the three aforementioned uses of stereotypes, many people also perpetuated harmful ideas about the perceived benefits of marginalization when processing their new results. In some cases, YouTubers appeared to experience a feeling of loss regarding the things they felt they missed out on before learning of their new racial identity. For instance, Kate Dee reflected in sadness that she had "missed Black History Month" after realizing she was 3% Sub-Saharanian African (2019). Matthew of the channel *Mizkif* had a similar reaction when his test results showed that in the category of "Trace Ancestry," he may be 0.1% Nigerian.

> I'm 0.1% Nigerian. What did I tell you? I knew it. I knew it this whole time. I'm actually black. I'm actually black, which means I have to go back to all of my healthcare professionals and I have to go redo my paperwork.
> (Mizkif, 2022)

Matthew also expressed his excitement to be able to get some college scholarships now that he would be able to indicate in applications that he was Black. While Matthew's reactions to his results may be argued to have been exaggerated based on his high-energy and constant joking throughout the video, he was not alone in the sentiment. In fact, TikTok user, @Allisoncamile, said she would try to get free tuition after learning she was 1.0% Broadly East Asian and Native American (2020).

The white desire to gain access to spaces and services neither designed for nor intended to be used by white people may be demonstrative of a gross misunderstanding of affirmative action styled programs and policies, and may be an area for future research. This is notwithstanding the social implications of these tests when white people race-shift in order to be allowed 'permission' to do things or say things they feel would otherwise be considered politically incorrect or racist for. Going back to the *Mizkif* YouTube channel, Matthew explained to viewers that one of the reasons he did the ancestry test was to find out what ethnicities he belonged to so he could "have the pass" in those situations (2022). This suggests that he would want to be allowed to make potentially offensive comments without repercussions because he wants to be able to claim that his comments come from the position of insider to the group he would be disparaging.

Addressing the fourth motif I identified, of people presenting their results in a non-ordinal manner, while most of the videos transparently presented the percentages attributed to each ethnic group in a given person's results, most people gave more time in their videos to talk about their non-European ancestry results, even if that portion of their results represented a statistical insignificance to the global picture. Both in video titles, thumbnails, and the graphic elements used within videos, many people chose to use a non-ordinal approach to present their results. This would suggest that people judged the information about their non-European ancestry as more important than their European ancestry, regardless of the results they had paid for.

One trend that may be getting more evident is how much attention, value, and emphasis many people in the videos I analyzed were giving to objectively nominal results. More weight would be given to the discussion of non-European results and this would be exacerbated in the

video titles and thumbnails as well. Notable examples of video thumbnails include Kate Dee writing "IM BLACK" across the thumbnail while her results indicated 3% African ancestry (2019); Jennifer Fix's thumbnail saying "I'M NOT WHITE?!" with results showing only 13.6% non-European ancestry (2018); Kayley Sakamoto's thumbnail showing a map of North Africa with a text box insinuating that her ethnicity is revealed to be African while her results indicated less than 1% North African ancestry (2018); and Jiffy Morales' video thumbnail showing the Mexican, Puerto Rican, and African American flags despite having no results indicating Mexican ancestry, 3.5% Puerto Rican, and having 2.3% Sub-Saharan African lineage (2020). Perhaps most egregiously, Ben Hubbard of the YouTube channel *Lainey and Ben* used a thumbnail which showed a map highlighting dozens of regions and countries across multiple continents, heavily implying that his ancestral lineage could be traced back to all of the highlighted areas (Lainey and Ben, 2022).

The way in which information was presented to the viewer and the amount of time spent discussing various aspects of a person's results also appeared to be disproportionate to the statistical significance of a given ethnicity estimate. This would suggest that a non-ordinal approach to data presentation was being favoured because non-European ancestry was more exciting or valuable to white people than their expected European DNA results. While this can be true for video thumbnails designed to drive clicks and engagement, the content of the videos themselves also showed a bias for non-European results. During their video, The Try Guys showed summary pages of each person's results but they were not listed in a linear hierarchy (neither largest to smallest or vice versa). Although he was found to be 20% broadly Northwestern European, *BuzzFeedVideo* highlighted this point last, and more noticeably, listed Keith's 0.2% Sub-Saharan African result second (2017). Similarly, Ned's second ancestry highlight was about him being 0.1% Native American even though Ned's overall results in the video are presented as him being 99.9% European (BuzzFeedVideo, 2017).

The non-ordinal presentation of ancestry results is foreshadowing of how many of the people featured in the videos I analyzed will potentially self-identify in real world scenarios. In fact, many people said their sense of self and racial identity was completely different after seeing their results. @Allisoncamile said that her "entire self-identity was shattered" (2020) and Kate Dee exclaimed "I don't even know what to say like, [...] how do I go about my life from here on out?" (2019). Likewise, Jeanine Amapola said she needed the test to tell her "What do I really identify as? What really is my culture? What really is my ethnicity?" (2020), while Jiffy Morales said her results would finally reveal who she was and who she could "identify as" (2020). The aftermath of these self-described racial identity reckonings in terms of how people may decide to identify will inevitably be influenced by the importance they afforded to their results qualitatively, irrespective of the statistical size and relevance of the results quantitatively. As a result, this may be forewarning of the ways in which white people will weaponize their personal *interpretations* of their genetic ancestry results more than the data presented by their test results.

Additionally, the exaggeration and overemphasis of so-called diverse results which are perceived to be subversive due to the visual appearance of those sharing the results (i.e, ostensibly white people discovering they are Black) function as diversity theatrics. The excessive, overblown, and hyperbolic significance that the people featured in the YouTube videos accorded to their "diverse" results is demonstrative of the—superficial—value being assigned to racial and ethnic diversity. The strategic and intention visual design of their video thumbnails to captivate viewers; the intrigue woven into the storytelling by first telling listeners that they think they're strictly of European descent; and then the sensationalised reactions of the

YouTubers lead to a parasocial connection and perfunctory feeling of catharsis. All of this contributes to the dramatics and theatrics of "becoming" a diverse person, and more importantly, someone who is no longer "just" white with the baggage associated with whiteness.

This hypothesis is supported by the ways in which the people discussing their results in the videos I analyzed were already starting to use first-person language to plant roots in their new ethnic lineage. Rather than talking through their results by using a more distanced voice such as to say "I have (any given) ancestral lineage" they would say "I am (any given) ethnicity." Most concerningly, this employment of "I am" statements was not reserved to larger percentages of a person's ancestry results and often was accompanied by the person naming several countries that would be listed in the test results' ethnicity pool. For instance, Jennifer Fix said "I'm Middle Eastern" even though her results only showed 0.5% North African and Arabian (2018). This is demonstrative of how lineal and lateral mechanics of descent are being facilitated via commercially available genetic ancestry DNA tests whereby anyone can make claims to racial identities in an effort to race-shift no matter the presence of any genetic connection.

Lastly, either lineal or lateral mechanics of descent were being employed as the people in the videos race-shifted, took claim of, and fulfilled their aspirational descent journeys thanks to their genetic ancestry test results. In almost all of the videos, people would use an active voice which heavily relied on "I am" first-person positioning to communicate their relationships with their test results. It should be noted as well that this use of possessive language did not seem to be influenced by the size of the percentages in people's results, meaning that the statistical significance of the ancestral lineage was not a precursor to whether or not someone would feel comfortable race-shifting so long as there was any genetic traces.

Interview themes

Of the five in-depth open ended interviews I conducted—one where my racial identity was not known or disclosed, and four where the interviewee knew my racial identity—three major themes emerged: (1) interviewees expressed an eagerness or interest in discovering diverse (read: of the global south) ancestry; (2) interviewees experienced feelings of disenchantment or discouragement when their results were more homogenous than they sought; and (3) interviewees were influenced or motivated by social media in their decision to take a genetic ancestry test. Strikingly, the first and second themes align with those identified amongst the YouTube videos regarding desire and disappointment respectively. Furthermore, the role of social media should not be underestimated, as I will argue that the diversity theatrics observed in the YouTube videos I sampled are exemplary of the characteristics which attracted the interviewees to social media platforms for reading about and sharing genetic ancestry test results.

Following the logic presented when discussing the ways that desire was expressed in the YouTube videos I analyzed, many of the people I interviewed conveyed a similar interest with respect to their choice to take a genetic ancestry test. While the interviewee's discussions were much less dramatic than those featured in the YouTube videos—which may be the consequence of the social acceptability bias, the format of storytelling in YouTube videos versus conversations, or a combination of both—a periphery phenomena to desire was observed, which I am categorizing as eagerness. One interviewee, Randy[4], said they had heard about other white identified individuals finding non-white ancestry through genetic tests. This in turn led Randy to

[4] In order to preserve anonymity but facilitate the reader's ability to differentiate research participants, all interviewees were given pseudonyms for this research's discussion.

take a test and hope for "something;" which they predicted could have possibly been "some sliver of Indigenous ancestry."

When asked how, if at all, "diverse" results might have changed their perception of identity, one interviewee who had overwhelmingly (99.5%) European ancestry shared that they would not necessarily have changed how they identified but they might have felt more drawn to a given cultural group. This was with some stipulations however, as they noted that they had a pre-existing interest in Chinese culture which would have been strengthened if they were to discover Chinese ancestry; whereas the interviewee conveyed a disinterest in Polish culture along with an unwillingness to live there because of anti-LGBT sentiments in Poland. Taking this section of the interview in two parts, I would argue that the first half harks back to the Ancestry commercial where the neighbour felt an affinity towards his neighbour after seeing he shared distant ancestry; while the second half of the statement ties back to lineal descent (Leroux, 2019) given the interviewee's apparent assumption that "1/128ths Polish ancestry" might have led them to becoming a citizen of Poland. In both instances, the interviewee demonstrated not only an eagerness for diversity, but an understanding of how they could mobilize that diversity to strengthen perceived ties to cultures (think: Kate Dee's connection to Indonesia), or if they should want to, justify making nationality claims or even consider moving to a country as a result of their new found ancestry.

Cathy, who also participated in the study and was the only interviewee who was not made aware of my own racial identity, explained that they found it "comical" to learn they were 98% European. I interpreted this to be an implication that Cathy did not consider results indicating European ancestry as meaningful as results which might have been non-European. This would follow the patterns observed from the YouTube videos where people expressed less interest in having their whiteness confirmed.

Data no.	Interviewee	European results	Non-European results
#01	Randy	99.5%	0.5%
#02	Fred	100%	0%
#03	Lily	N/A	N/A
#04	Cathy	98.7%	1.3%
#05	Alec	N/A	N/A

Table 4. Rate of European vs non-European results of Interviewees[5]

Another interviewee, Fred, said of their results that they were "hoping that it might be a bit more varied" and developed their statement by saying they wanted [the results] to be "super diverse." Later in the interview, Fred admitted that had they received results containing small percentages of less than 5% they would still prefer that to the overwhelmingly homogenous results they received. Something else which came up for an interviewee was that they had considered the potential outcome of taking the test and discovering that they had African ancestry which they would have interpreted as being related to the transatlantic slave trade due to their known familial lineage. Following this admission, however, the interviewee shared that they would have considered any results which were not British or Irish as a positive. They elaborated and explained that they see British and Irish culture as dominant and part of the mainstream which they perceived as "bland" and "not as interesting."

This admittance was unexpected, especially considering the work of Tuck and Yang who argue that white people want to move away from whiteness because of the guilt they associate with white colonial history in particular (2012). This concession would therefore suggest that motives for genealogical aspiration are more dominant than the incitement to move towards innocence.

Again, echoing back to the results from the YouTube videos utilized for my study, several interviewees conveyed discouragement with the results they received from their genetic ancestry tests. Randy said they felt "a tinge of disappointment that there was nothing outside of Europe" in their results, even though they uncovered European ancestry they had been previously unaware of. Likewise, Lily said of their results that they had "high hopes" but ultimately felt so discouraged that they deleted their account entirely when they weren't able to experience the same feelings of discovery that others seemingly had.

> Knowing we have a slightly different type of European is still kind of cool; it's not as exciting as [you know] your 40th great-grandfather was from Morocco or something that would have been like 'wow!'
> Randy

One of the interviewees gave some context that they grew up with a lot of friends who were first or second generation immigrants, and that they felt jealous that so many of their friends spoke a second language and culture that was different from white Western culture.

[5] Totals may not combine to 100% where DNA was left unassigned.

Randy reflected on how they were not properly introduced to the concept that being white had its own culture, which applies to the aforementioned concept of white racial consciousness (Rowe et al., 1994).

When discussing their feelings towards the results they received, Fred said they didn't find their ancestry "particularly interesting," but had they gotten more diverse results they would have been interested in sharing their results with others. They went on to say that "it would have been nice to have it be a little more mixed up" because they personally value diversity and learning about other cultures, and they regretted that it appeared as though their ancestors did not hold similar values given the homogeneity of their ancestry.

Two interviewees shared a similar level of discouragement at the lack of detail and precision in their ancestry results. They both shared that they would have preferred to learn more about the cultures of the groups they were part of, beyond the scope of the genetic genealogy being presented. While these two experiences do not fall within the breadth of my research, it should not be ignored that commercially available, direct-to-consumer genetic ancestry tests leave much to be desired for consumers.

23andMe reported that in 2022 that they spent $100,338,000 on sales and marketing (23andMe Inc., 2023), and considering the prolificity of YouTube videos showing people reacting to the results of their genetic ancestry tests and the corresponding audience sizes of said videos, it is no surprise that this influences people to want to uncover their own secret diversity.

One interviewee explained that they had seen multiple people on Facebook sharing the results they had gotten from taking a test, and this led them to taking one of their own. Importantly, the results they saw their friends sharing were always of the type where there were unexpected or "diverse" results subjectively worthy of posting about to social media. In the interviewee's situation, they did not deem their ancestry results interesting enough and so they opted to not share on social media in the same boastful ways their friends were. This would suggest that people, consciously or not, are viewing their results as something worthy of sharing so long as they can extract social capital through the action of announcing their ancestry to others.

Conclusion

Knowing how scarce resources are for underserved and marginalized people, there is a real danger that presents itself when white people consume these resources. When someone who is ostensibly white occupies spaces designated for racialized people, they will typically align more within white respectability politics and thus be better received in those spaces. Given that this research looked at how genetic ancestry test results can shape the racial identity of white test takers, it would be worthwhile for the field to do subsequent research on how white people navigate the world post-results. Additionally, due to the social acceptability bias, it may be relevant to have white individuals conducting the interviews with future research participants in order to verify the extent to white the race of the researcher influences the responses of a participant. Special attention should be paid to the ways the research participants may or may not express disappointment and desire, as I have hypothesized that these two themes were particularly vulnerable to the social acceptability bias and may have motivated the answers I was given during my interviews of research participants.

Dangerously, white people in both the interviews and especially the YouTube videos exhibited an interest or proclivity in mobilizing their ancestry results as a form of social

currency. Considering the ways that Indigenous people have been denied status rights when they are of mixed heritage, or the one drop blood rule and racist calculations of blood quantum, the reverse would likely be more difficult to achieve for people of colour with European ancestry to mobilize their results in order to access socioeconomic spaces historically exclusive to white people. People of colour may even find themselves penalised structurally or culturally for attempting to do so, whereas white people can access these channels and are celebrated for doing so. As a result, ostensibly white people have the privilege to weaponize their genetic ancestry results while racialized people do not find themselves in the same position to capitalize on the leverage of identity politics and race-shifting.

One of the biggest barriers in this research was the unanticipated emotional burden that came with studying race-shifting at such close proximity. It was not uncommon for me to feel emotionally fatigued after conducting interviews or transcribing YouTube videos that I analyzed throughout my research. In order to overcome the challenge of reading about, writing about, and thinking about the insidious channels racism operates within via ancestry tests, I was required to take frequent breaks from my research. The space and time between periods of work helped to reduce the likelihood of becoming overwhelmed. For future research in this area, researchers of colour should consider the impacts of studying racism on their mental health and overall productivity in order to better assess the scope of work they take on.

In conclusion, the use of commercial genetic ancestry tests by white individuals for the purposes of identity formation may lead to the galvanization of so-called scientifically objective proofs which in turn get mobilized and weaponized to occupy spaces and consume resources intended for the racial minority. This risk is especially high in cases where an individual finds themself allured by the promises of racial discovery, inspirited by the potential to claim distance from whiteness, and craving the “benefits” they envy which they do not possess as part of the majority. Indeed, the desire and seeming ability of white people to eat the Other (hooks, 1992) for pleasure and to capitalize on the invisibility of their whiteness represents a dangerous and slippery slope. In response, we must continue to be critical of the assumption that science is void of prejudice; denounce the growing trends of gene fetishism and race-shifting; and disparage individuals from using their genetic ancestry results as a vehicle for avoiding white guilt.

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Appendices

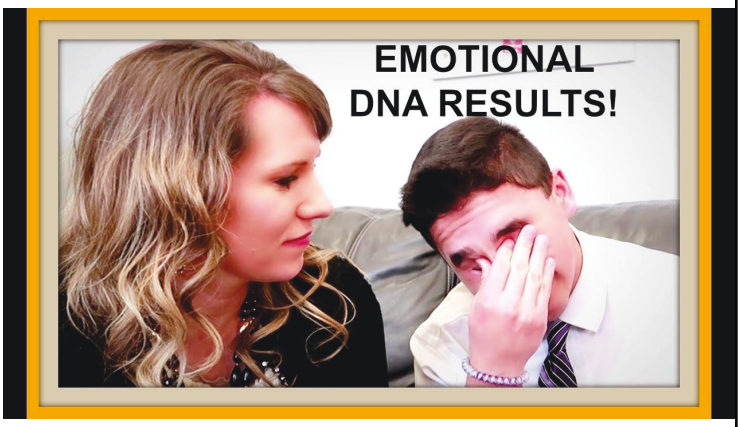
Appendix A: YouTube video information

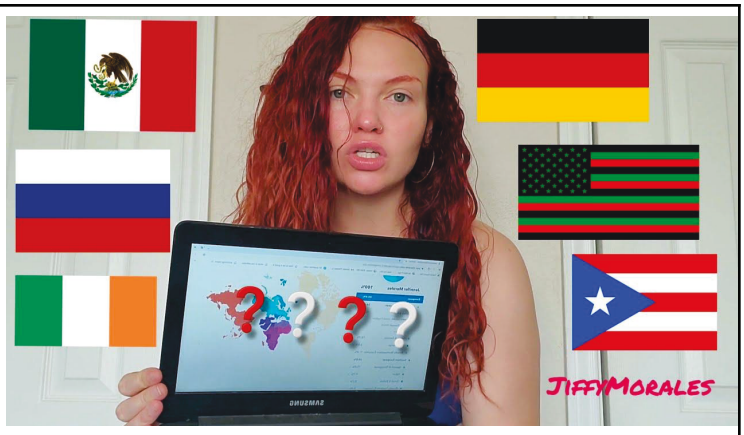
Data no.	Video Title	Channel Name	Date Posted	Number of Views	Date Collected	Thumbnail Reference no.
#01	I Took A DNA Ancestry Test...	Jennifer Fix	2018-12-09	132,218 (as of 2023-04-07)	2021-03-21	Tn-1
#02	DNA TEST RESULTS WERE UNEXPECTED - I'M BLACK + GUESS WHAT	Kate Dee	2019-03-09	84,591 (as of 2023-04-07)	2021-03-14	Tn-2
#03	READING MY ANCESTRY DNA RESULTS! I BEEN LIED TO MY ENTIRE LIFE!	ARI TV	2018-04-29	1,897,198 (as of 2023-04-07)	2021-03-14	Tn-3
#04	The Try Guys Take An Ancestry DNA Test	BuzzFeed Video	2017-05-20	22,080,919 (as of 2023-04-07)	2021-03-14	Tn-4
#05	DNA RESULTS (EMOTIONAL) | 23 AND ME	Crazy Pieces	2019-04-05	519,893 (as of 2023-04-07)	2021-03-14	Tn-5
#06	Mixed Girl Takes a DNA Test! Finding out the TRUTH.. 23andMe DNA Test	Jeanine Amapola	2020-07-02	129,211 (as of 2023-04-07)	2021-03-14	Tn-6
#07	Racially/Ethnically Ambiguous Girl Takes an Ancestry DNA Test: Shocking Results	Jiffy Morales	2020-04-25	16,002 (as of 2023-04-07)	2021-03-14	Tn-7
#08	White girl very confused by DNA results | Ancestry DNA	Kayley Sakamoto	"4 years ago"	403,000 (as of 2023-04-07)	2021-03-14	Tn-8
#09	We took a DNA test and the results were surprising!	Marina in America	2020-06-02	81,014 (as of 2023-04-07)	2021-03-14	Tn-9
#10	I Did A DNA Test... (I Guess Im Cancelled Now)	PewDiePie	2021-01-25	4,611,667 (as of 2023-04-07)	2021-03-14	Tn-10
#11	DNA TEST RESULTS?!?! | 23&Me	Summer Marie	2018-09-14	47,449 (as of 2023-04-07)	2022-04-14	Tn-11
#12	REACTING TO MY ANCESTRY DNA RESULTS	Lauren Elloise	2021-11-05	17,114 (as of	2022-04-14	Tn-12

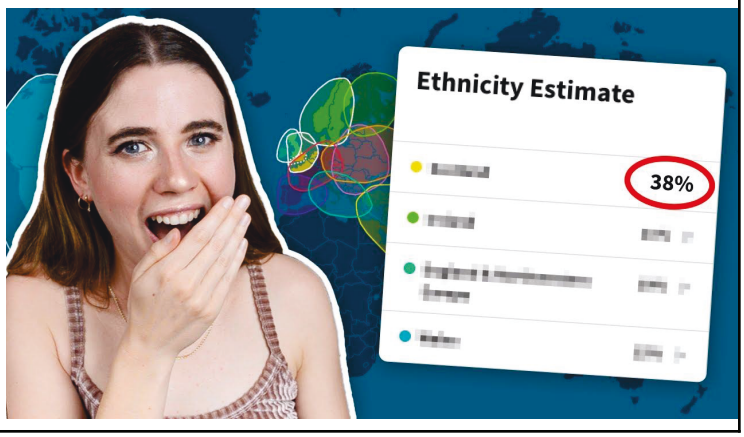
				2023-04-07)		
#13	So My DNA Test Results Came In...	Mizkif	2022-03-20	222,172 (as of 2023-04-07)	2022-04-14	Tn-13
#14	I Took an Ancestry DNA Test...	More BrodieTV	2022-03-05	5,235 (as of 2023-04-07)	2022-04-18	Tn-14
#15	Am I really ITALIAN? - MyHeritage DNA test results	Phil’s World	2019-12-29	24,997 (as of 2023-04-07)	2022-04-18	Tn-15
#16	23andMe Ancestry + Health | I'm 6.9% WHAT?! | COMPREHENSIVE RESULTS + REVIEW	DayWithPhae	2018-04-11	54,750 (as of 2023-04-07)	2022-04-18	Tn-16
#17	i took a 23 and me genetics test.. SHOCKING RESULTS.	Hollyann Rose	2022-01-25	1,537 (as of 2023-04-16)	2023-04-16	Tn-17
#18	Shocking DNA test results! // 23 and Me Review	Marc Forsyth	2020-12-16	13,819 (as of 2023-04-16)	2023-04-16	Tn-18
#19	Learning of my African Heritage!	Sam and Nia	2022-01-03	22, 898 (as of 2023-04-16)	2023-04-16	Tn-19
#20	I'M AFRICAN?! - MyHeritage DNA RESULTS	Amelie Wilsens	2021-12-26	1,276 (as of 2023-04-16)	2023-04-16	Tn-20
#21	I took a DNA Test to see where I'm from	Chakir	2019-06-23	36,558 (as of 2023-04-07)	2023-04-16	Tn-21
#22	my dna results | 23andMe	Anna lenkovska	2021-07-12	101,903 (as of 2023-04-16)	2023-04-16	Tn-22
#23	SHOCKED BY OUR DNA RESULTS! | MyHeritage DNA Kit	Sofie’s World	2018-07-31	365,596 (as of 2023-04-16)	2023-04-16	Tn-23
#24	My Life Is A Lie - MyHeritage DNA Test Results - I'm Not Who I Thought I Was	Cat Country 107.3	2018-05-17	211,120 (as of 2023-04-16)	2023-04-16	Tn-24
#25	ANCESTRY DNA | MY SHOCKING RESULTS	Lainey and Ben	2022-08-10	26,480 (as of 2023-07-11)	2023-07-11	Tn-25

Appendix B: YouTube video thumbnails

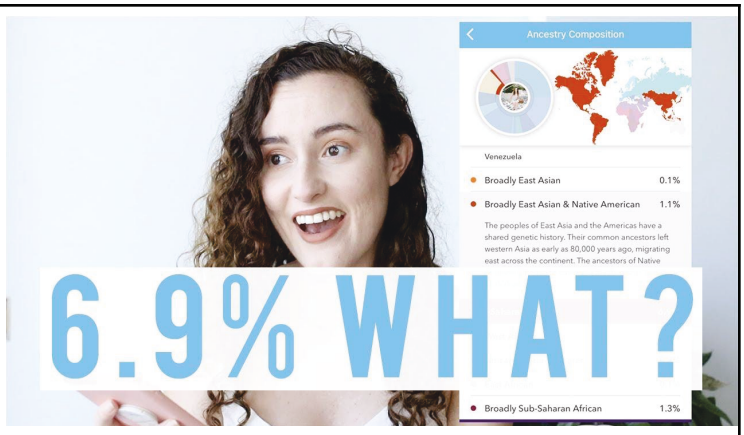
Thumbnail Reference no. (Tn)	Thumbnail image
Tn-1	
Tn-2	
Tn-3	

Tn-4	
Tn-5	
Tn-6	

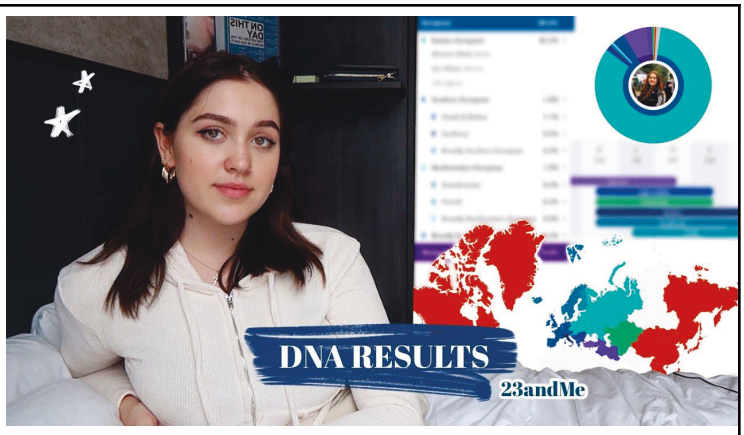
Tn-7	JIFFYMORALES
Tn-8	White girl very confused by DNA results Ethnicity Africa Africa North IRAQ KUWAIT SAUDI ARABIA EMIRATES OMAN lol im dumb
Tn-9	DNA TEST SHOCKING IRISH? NIGERIAN? PORTUGUESE? RESULTS!!!

Tn-10	
Tn-11	
Tn-12	

Tn-13	
Tn-14	
Tn-15	

Tn-16	
Tn-17	
Tn-18	

Tn-19	
Tn-20	
Tn-21	

Tn-22	
Tn-23	
Tn-24	

Tn-25	Ethnicity Estimate Your DNA looks most like DNA from these 7 world regions I'M FROM WHERE?!

Appendix C: Interviewee recruitment poster



Appendix D: Consent form



WRITTEN CONSENT FORM

Study Title: White racial identity: The implications of genetic ancestry testing for critical race theory
Researcher: Mitchell Rae Cousineau
Researcher's Contact Information: mitchellraecousineau@gmail.com | (438) 935-5786
Faculty Supervisor: Professor Océane Jasor
Faculty Supervisor's Contact Information: oceane.jasor@concordia.ca | (438) 407-3834
Source of funding for the study: Not applicable.

You are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

A. PURPOSE
The purpose of the research is to understand the ways in which white people navigate their racial identity and develop a sense of white racial identity, or otherwise a racialized identity, in their interpretations of results they receive from commercially available genetic ancestry tests.

B. PROCEDURES
If you participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview where you will be asked to screenshare the results of your genetic ancestry test on Zoom with the researcher and answer questions asked by the researcher about your racial identity and the ways that your ancestry results may or may not have influenced your understanding of yourself and your identity.

In total, participating in this study will take one hour (60 minutes).

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

Potential benefits include being affirmed in your sense of self and connections to your ancestry by verbalizing your feelings around your racial identity.

There is minimal risk involved in the study, however, it is possible that by discussing a sensitive topic such as race, racial identity, and whiteness, this may cause psychological discomfort, anxiety, and/or uneasiness.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

We will gather the following information as part of this research: Your age, your racial identity, the brand of genetic ancestry test you took, the date you took your test, and yours answers from the interview itself which is on the subject of your racial identity and your interpretation of the test results.

We will not allow anyone to access the information, except people directly involved in conducting the research. We will only use the information for the purposes of the research described in this form.

The information gathered will be confidential. That means that we as the research team will know your identity, but no one outside of the research team will know your identity and your identity will not be disclosed in the publishing of the results.

We will protect the information by keeping all recordings of the interview and the transcripts as password protected files. After 10 years, all collected information will be destroyed.

We intend to publish the results of the research. However, it will not be possible to identify you in the published results. Your information and identity will be protected at all times by using a pseudonym.

F. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you do participate, you can stop at any time. You can also ask that the information you provided not be used, and your choice will be respected. If you decide that you don't want us to use your information, you must tell the researcher no later than 30 days after the date of your interview.

There are no negative consequences for not participating, stopping in the middle, or asking us not to use your information.

G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME (please print)

_____

SIGNATURE

_____

DATE

_____

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page 1. You may also contact their faculty supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca.

Appendix E: Interview questions

Primary research question:

(1) How are white individuals using direct-to-consumer ancestry tests to interpret their own whiteness and racial identity?
(2) Why are white people seemingly seeking to appropriate a new racial identity other than white in the context of their intentions to undergo genetic genealogy testing?
(3) What are the impacts and consequences for communities of colour when white people use genetic ancestry test results to race-shift?

Interview questions:

- Tell me how you identify in your:
    - Nationality
    - Ethnicity
    - Racial identity
- Can you tell me what made you decide you wanted to take a genetic ancestry test?
- What were your expectations with taking the test? Did you have assumptions about what the results would be?
- What was your initial thoughts when you saw your results?
- Were the results what you anticipated?
- Did anything in your results surprise you?
- Did anything in your results upset you? Disappoint you? Frustrate you?
- Overall, do you feel positively or negatively towards your results? Why?
- In what ways have the results of the test influenced the way you understand your racial identity now?
- Do you feel like you've changed the way you move in the world as a result of your test?
    - Do you actively identify differently as a result of your test?