

The Peculiar

Positioning of African American Identity

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Abstract

This paper examines how African Americans exemplify concepts of double consciousness, liminality, and racial construction while taking ancestry DNA tests along with the transformative effects those tests have on the formation of identity amongst African Americans. It includes the results of extensive interviews with celebrity African Americans guests, who have taken DNA tests, from the show *Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.* By utilizing a data-driven coding method, the initial visual and verbal responses of the guests were analyzed and then grouped by the emerging themes that began to present themselves within the data. The research shows that the African Americans guests conclude these segments with various interpretations of self and identity. Some described experiencing fulfillment while others gained a sense of belonging. I revisit the aforementioned concepts, revealing the latent motivations African Americans have for taking such lengths to discover who they are.

Background

Identity exists as a key term in anthropology whose definition contains numerous layers. Despite its complexity, anthropologists agree that it is an indisputable phenomenon in the world. Humans naturally work to distinguish what makes themselves unique amongst others; however, this process can be impeded. That is to say, the journey to discovering one's true self is universal in its desirability yet limited in its attainability. For instance, diasporas or groups involuntarily dispersed from their homelands, such as African Americans, experience contention while coming to terms with their identity as they are confined to the rule of their new setting. Black Americans and similar diasporas often form their identities while in subsidiary roles. This positioning facilitated black Americans into having a propensity for exploring their identities through a lens separate from the ideologies of those in power. Manifestations of this experience includes tactics such as embarking on heritage tours or the use of DNA testing. Determining one's ancestry during and prior to America's conception has become a popular pursuit amongst African Americans in recent years, suggesting that there is a significant relationship between heritage and identity. For this reason, I suspect ancestry DNA tests possess the capacity to reconstruct the formation of identity amongst African Americans.

Methodology

The data set for this investigation into the transformative experience of African Americans is a set of interviews from the PBS television series, *Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.* The show features Dr. Henry Louis Gates interviewing African American celebrities about the results of their ancestral DNA test along with providing them a historical overview of their ancestors. This project focuses on a select set of interviews that are made of up African American guests. These hour-long segments provide informative discourse and reactions of African Americans as they come to find out more about their ancestry. Guests were chosen based on how current their interview was and on the region in which they were born to diversify the results, as the African American experience varies. The latest DNA tests reflect more precise results (all from the last two years). In order to effectively interpret this information, responses were coded and grouped. By utilizing a data-driven coding method, the initial visual and verbal responses of the guests were analyzed and then grouped by the emerging themes that began to present themselves within the data.

Results

An in-depth, qualitative analysis of the interviews from *Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.* established several themes. Celebrity guests of African American descent, ages ranging from their late twenties to sixty, provided detailed responses and reactions. Although their experiences and origins are not homogenous, the African American guests shared a homogenous response in the way in which they reacted to being presented with DNA data and genealogical data. The following three codes were most common: (1) a desire to discover more, (2) coming to terms, and (3) edification. From these codes, themes including double consciousness, liminality, and theories of racial construction, such as negrescence, emerge and provide insight into the effects of ancestry DNA tests on African American identity.

Codes	Themes	Quotations
Desire to discover more	Liminality Negrescence	"waiting for this all my life" "there's this weird sort of thing...being black in this country...life for me begins in St. Louis...you get used to not knowing for so long...it's a joy to know I'm real..."
Coming to terms	Panethnicity Afrocentrism	"I did not know who I was until an hour ago" "This is coming full circle"
Edification	Double-consciousness Negrescence	"My family is going to flip! I don't know if anybody knows" "They have names...that's amazing..."

Conclusions

The research provides that ancestry DNA tests assist African Americans in developing healthy identities. These tests serve as a metaphorical GPS, helping black Americans find a place in society so that they can leave their once liminal position. They are also provided a chance to reconcile their rich and convoluted history which in turn revitalizes their perception of identity.

Ancestry DNA tests undoubtedly assist African Americans in reconciling their identity. This transformative experience provided African Americans with an opportunity to connect their origins to real people and groups, instilling them with a sense of belonging. Future research should interrogate the deeper connection between identity and ancestry along with whether or not DNA evidence is sufficient in defining who we are.

References

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