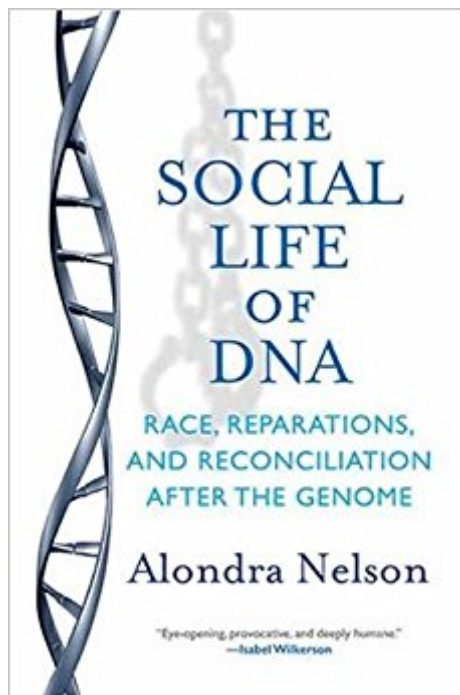




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The Social Life Of DNA: Race, Reparations, And Reconciliation After The Genome



Synopsis

2017 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award (Finalist)The unexpected story of how genetic testing is affecting race in AmericaWe know DNA is a master key that unlocks medical and forensic secrets, but its genealogical life is both revelatory and endlessly fascinating. Tracing genealogy is now the second-most popular hobby amongst Americans, as well as the second-most visited online category. This billion-dollar industry has spawned popular television shows, websites, and Internet communities, and a booming heritage tourism circuit.The tsunami of interest in genetic ancestry tracing from the African American community has been especially overwhelming. In *The Social Life of DNA*, Alondra Nelson takes us on an unprecedented journey into how the double helix has wound its way into the heart of the most urgent contemporary social issues around race.For over a decade, Nelson has deeply studied this phenomenon. Artfully weaving together keenly observed interactions with root-seekers alongside illuminating historical details and revealing personal narrative, she shows that genetic genealogy is a new tool for addressing old and enduring issues. In *The Social Life of DNA*, she explains how these cutting-edge DNA-based techniques are being used in myriad ways, including grappling with the unfinished business of slavery: to foster reconciliation, to establish ties with African ancestral homelands, to rethink and sometimes alter citizenship, and to make legal claims for slavery reparations specifically based on ancestry.Nelson incisively shows that DNA is a portal to the past that yields insight for the present and future, shining a light on social traumas and historical injustices that still resonate today. Science can be a crucial ally to activism to spur social change and transform twenty-first-century racial politics. But Nelson warns her readers to be discerning: for the social repair we seek can't be found in even the most sophisticated science. Engrossing and highly original, *The Social Life of DNA* is a must-read for anyone interested in race, science, history and how our reckoning with the past may help us to chart a more just course for tomorrow.From the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“Meticulously detailed. Nelson adds another chapter to the somber history of injustice toward African-Americans, but it is one in which science is enriching lives by forging new identities and connections to ancestral homelands.”
—Kirkus Reviews
“One of this generation’s most gifted scholars examines the unfolding mysteries of DNA sequencing and the limits and promises of genetic genealogy at the intersection of race, politics and identity. Alondra Nelson brilliantly guides us on a journey of discovery in this cautionary tale of the high-stakes efforts to reconcile our racial origins and to find redemption as a country. Eye-opening, provocative and deeply humane.”
—Isabel Wilkerson, author of *The Warmth of Other Suns*
“Alondra Nelson takes us into a complex and endlessly fascinating space where genetic ancestry testing meets racial politics. With her unique and wonderful gifts for research and insight into genetic science, ethnography and history, *The Social Life of DNA* comes at a moment when the questions it raises about race and social justice couldn’t be more pressing and urgent.”
—Rebecca Skloot, author of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*
“Nelson explores this large, sprawling, fascinating subject with clarity, passion, rigor, and a keen eye for revealing detail. *The Social Life of DNA* will appeal to a broad readership interested in history, race, and science. Geneticists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and jurists will be stimulated by reading this book. It is a brilliant work.”
—Randall Kennedy, Michael R. Klein Professor at Harvard Law School and author of *The Persistence of the Color Line*
“Alondra Nelson tells a story for anyone interested in their own family, even their own memory. Using fresh genetics research and writing like an investigative reporter, Nelson clears up the mystery about our society’s rush to DNA.”
—Edward Ball, author of *Slaves in the Family*
“*The Social Life of DNA* is a brilliant ethnography of the recreational uses of DNA...Timely and original, this book offers a nuanced and engrossing negotiation between genetic truth and truthiness.”
—Patricia J. Williams, James L. Dohr Professor of Law at Columbia University and columnist for *The Nation*
“The double helix now lies at the center of some of the most significant issues of our time, Alondra Nelson writes in this valuable and illuminating book. Since

2003, she has been following the ways that DNA intertwines with race, and *The Social Life of DNA* is her clear-eyed, sharp, and closely observed account of the phenomenon. It couldn't be more timely.

•Jonathan Weiner, Maxwell M. Geffen Professor of Medical and Scientific Journalism at Columbia Journalism School

“Alondra Nelson's account of how genetic data was transformed into contested political culture is as lucid as it is path-breaking. This exhilarating survey of how DNA became an agent in the politics of reparation and reconciliation has not only extended analysis of race and racism but created a new field of comparative research.”

•Paul Gilroy, professor of American and English literature, King's College, London

"The *Social Life of DNA* is a brilliant ethnography of the recreational uses of DNA. Besieged as our culture has become by beguiling promises of romantic heraldry and forensic infallibility, Nelson takes an unflinching yet sympathetic look at how popular yearning for lost roots has led to DNA as metaphor: reading our genes has become an inferential, often scientifically unsubstantiated link between past, present and future. It has emerged as the symbolic grounding for magical cures, heritage tourism, escapist fantasy, as well as legal actions for ethnic and racial reconciliation, reparations and repatriation. Timely and original, this book offers a nuanced and engrossing negotiation between genetic truth and truthiness.”

—Patricia J. Williams, James L. Dohr Professor of Law at Columbia University and columnist for *The Nation*

Alondra Nelson is professor of sociology and gender studies at Columbia University, where she served as the inaugural Dean of Social Science. She is author of the award-winning book *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination* and her writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Science*, *Boston Globe*, and the *Guardian*. She lives in New York City.

As descendants of people forcibly separated from their national and ethnic groups centuries ago, descendants of enslaved Africans have little to rely on but DNA technology to learn who they are. In this book, Alondra Nelson does an impeccable job of showing how DNA breakthroughs can and are being used to heal people.

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

that it took me thrice the normal time to read. Not only do I feel that I have learned something about genetics and genealogy, I have, more importantly, come to a greater understanding of the cultural significance of these studies in the black community. I have long understood the theft of culture and family from Africans and African-Americans as a part of the many horrors of slavery. What I had failed to understand was how emotionally significant an ethnic identity can be to a person. In particular a person for whom this identity has not only been taken but replaced with an identity as victim. This has given me a great deal to process for which I thank the author. I received a complimentary copy of this book via the Goodreads First Reads program

This author has a rare ability to explain complex social science topics in ways that just make sense. Her conversational style is welcoming of novice and casual readers of the subject matter. Her research is thorough and thoughtful, which ensures that experts will learn something new as well. The book is not over-burdened with academic references (i.e., she uses endnotes as they are intended to be used), but she doesn't skimp on engaging important and relevant scholarship. Readers will become familiar with highly influential work while being entertained by the fascinating stories she covers in this book. This is an important read for anyone interested in anthropological genetics or the non-medical applications of DNA analysis. You don't have to be an academic to understand or enjoy this book. I highly recommend it.

The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation after the Genome offers a brief overview of how the advent of genetic testing has impacted views on race, the birth of genealogical tracing of pre-Middle Passage heritage, and the potential for its use in legal claims against existing companies that profited from the slave trade. This is a wide area to cover and while the book delivers what it promises it offers only brief overviews of these topics. What I found most intriguing is the use of DNA to test the genetic ancestry of African Diaspora populations pioneered by biologist Rick Kittles and his company African Ancestry. While it's clear the author remains skeptical about how accurate this technology is at present, as she demonstrates the newly empowered sense of identity users often get from the test results does offer some basis for the last part of the book's title "Reconciliation" a vital component for this country to finally come to terms with the still-lingering legacy of slavery. For readers interested in any of these topics this book would be a good starting point. 3-1/2 stars

While the topic is generally interesting, there were several issues with the book that made it less

enjoyable than it really could have been. First, the author is a horrible writer. She constantly repeated information and many paragraphs were written using needlessly complicated vocabulary (felt like someone who learned a bunch of words recently and wanted to force them into a single paragraph to sound smart). Second, the author is frankly not qualified to write on certain parts of this topic. Most books I've read by sociologists focus on stories told by others, but in this case, the author apparently felt compelled to write technical scientific descriptions from her own knowledge, that she didn't seem to personally understand well. And finally, whole chapters in the middle of the book simply espoused the author's personal opinions about reparations and slavery. Interesting for sure, but not about DNA, genealogy, or science at all.

Interesting book but I didn't think Nelson understood what DNA is all about or that she was able to write clearly about some of the subjects she was trying to write about. Parts of the book are good but other parts were confusing. It was not clear how DNA was going to do all of the things the author seem to think it might do. Midwest Independent Research, educational websites. Race, mwir-race.blogspot. There is a book list.

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