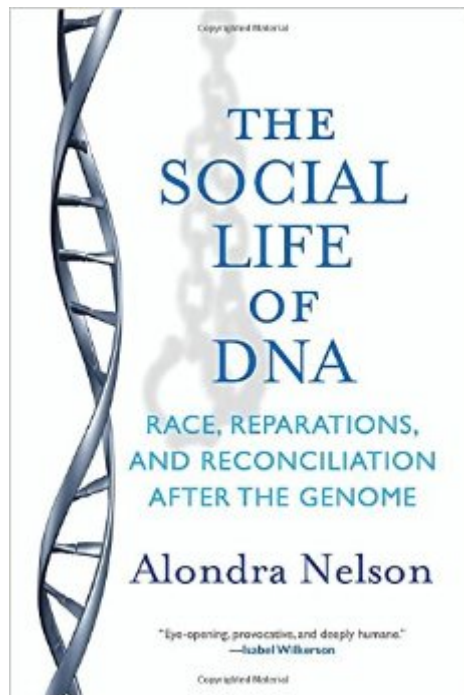


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# The Social Life Of DNA: Race, Reparations, And Reconciliation After The Genome



## Synopsis

We 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 studied this phenomenon. Weaving together keenly observed interactions with root-seekers alongside 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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.

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.

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

*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 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 R 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

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