

## On My Genes

“Ladies never spit,” said my very proper, southern mother the summer afternoon she chanced upon me sitting on the back steps of our small South Carolina house trying to see just how far I could spit on the dry dust of our grassless back yard.

And yet, 65 years later, I didn’t hesitate as I spit into the funnel attached to a test tube, sealed it with its accompanying lid, and mailed it off for my own personal Ancestry DNA Analysis. After months of watching TV shows where unsuspecting people discovered truths about their forefathers and mothers, I decided that I too wanted to know the secrets available only on my genes. The instruction sheet said that it would take 6 to 8 weeks for my results to arrive.

I didn’t grow up hearing stories about long-dead grandparents, great aunts, or cousins in my matrilineal line. My mother and her siblings – six in all - held their family’s truths close to their hearts, only revealing tidbits about a past that drove all of them, except my mother, from the small town where they were born. They had all died before I began my search for the leaves on my family tree. But I’ve always been fascinated by ghosts. Not the kind who haunt old houses or wander the streets at Halloween; but ghosts whose blood I carry. The ghosts of men and women who were born on foreign shores and shipped to Charleston, South Carolina. Ghosts who must have planted and harvested. (Why else would I be so drawn to gardening?) Ghosts who bred new workers, nursed other women’s children, washed and ironed clothes they never wore. Ghosts whose stories were never told because their tongues were silenced. My DNA analysis can’t possibly give faces to the names I’ve managed to unearth from the 1920 and 1930 censuses; but it will tell me where they began their journey.

It is now Thanksgiving morning, two weeks since the email notifying me that the tube carrying my DNA sample had been received and was in the lab for processing. By my calculation, my report should have arrived around Christmas. But a message on my phone notifies me that my Ancestry DNA Analysis is now ready! Were their discoveries so momentous that they rushed my analysis, and, undeterred by this very American holiday, hurried to let me know the news?

I quickly turn off the faucet that’s filling the tub for my morning bath, and instead, immerse myself in scientific analysis. Ancestry.com’s email reads: Great news! The moment you’ve been waiting for is here. The Ancestry DNA results are ready for: Sarah White. As instructed, I go to their website, and sign into my section. The first line of my report reads: *79% Africa*. This is no surprise to me. Simply verification of my expectations. What does intrigue me is how many regions contribute to that 79%, though it shouldn’t, since I remember from Alex Haley’s best seller *Roots* that Africans traditionally arranged marriages between members of far-flung tribes, thus insuring genetic diversity. The list reads:

- Ivory Coast/Ghana – 22%
- Senegal – 15%
- Cameroon/Congo – 11%
- Nigeria – 11%
- Benin/Toga- 6%
- African Southeastern Bantu- 6%
- Mali- 5%
- North Africa – 2%
- Africa South-Central Hunter Gatherers - <1%

When I click on the accompanying map, it contradicts the trans-medium who years ago told me that my people came from a region near the confluence of the Blue, and White Nile. The places where my forebearers lived are mostly on the west coast of Africa. Again, I recall a fact from Alex Haley’s book: the west coast was the point of embarkation for most captured Africans. It made sense that they would first capture men and women from nearby regions.

And then, the line *Europe – 20%* gives me pause, though it doesn't surprise me either. The face in my mirror has always made me aware that my genes have been mixed with those of someone who didn't come to America in chains. One piece of family history that I overheard was my mother's suspicion that her father was the white doctor her mother worked for, not the man she called Pa. My mother doubted her mother's explanation that her American Indian forebearers were responsible for her light skin, and straight black hair. Now, my mother's suspicion seems confirmed. No American Indian markers appear on my DNA. Just 13% Great Britain (England, Scotland, Wales) with 7% Trace regions (Ireland, and Europe West)

In the 1920 Census, my maternal grandmother is listed as Mulatto, as are all six of her children. Her husband, my grandfather, is listed as black. Was it my mulatto great-grandmother who was taken by force or coercion? Or was it my grandmother who fell victim to the southern way of life long after slavery ended? The people who can answer that question took their stories with them to their graves. English plantation owners not only contributed 20% of my DNA, but they also provided my name: - Bracey, Bracy, Brassie and Bresse are all variations of a Scottish name. Names that belonged to South Carolina plantation owners. After Emancipation, many freed slaves who had no last name took their former slave owner's name.

This documentation is all rather unsettling, but it changes nothing. It simply identifies the parts that make me who I am. In the words of the cartoon character Pop-Eye, "I yam what I yam." And I love who I am. Like legions of Americans, I now know the details of how I fit into the mosaic pattern of this country. The \$100 I spent for this DNA Analysis was money well-spent. I think even my proper, southern mother would approve of my spitting – just this once.