

# Narrative analysis as a feminist method: The case of genetic ancestry tests

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## Abstract

This article contributes to discussions of methodology in gender studies by examining narrative analysis as a feminist method. Using direct-to-consumer genetic ancestry services as a case study, the author discusses the potential of narrative analysis in interrogating complex cultural phenomena. The analysis focuses on the commercial website of the UK-based genetics company Oxford Ancestors, which the author situates at the intersection of the cultural narratives of commercialization, scientific advance and personal quest. By interrogating the mutual embeddedness of these narratives, the author demonstrates how narrative analysis moves across structure and context capturing the processes through which facts about gender come into being. The author suggests that this focus on the tension between the abstract and the specific in cultural phenomena is what makes narrative analysis a particularly effective tool for feminist cultural analysis.

## Keywords

Context, cultural analysis, direct-to-consumer genetics, evolution, genealogy, genomics, methodology, narrative theory

The first decade of the new millennium engendered an increasing range of online genetic tests marketed directly to consumers. Building on advances in molecular biotechnology and the commercial potential of the Internet, these direct-to-consumer (DTC) genetic tests represent the new kind of biologization of the everyday and commodification of the biological that characterizes 21st-century western culture. At the same time, these services are underwritten by fundamental tensions: there is a disconnection between the immateriality of the knowledge they sell and the concrete materiality of the tissues and

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techniques they employ, as well as between the geographically specific laboratories and the global networks of information exchange. This kind of conceptual friction in contemporary biotechnological culture has invited numerous critical enquiries, including Eugene Thacker's (2005) examination of the productive paradox of immaterial informatics and biological matter in genomics, and Sarah Franklin's (2007) exploration of the multiple material, commercial and colonial genealogies of cloning.

As an object of research, DTC genetics extends across diverse fields such as cultural studies, science studies, postcolonial theory, economics and gender studies – it would, indeed, be futile to try to determine the primary field to which the phenomenon 'belongs' (in the sense that movies 'belong' to film studies and social practices to anthropology or sociology).<sup>1</sup> DTC genetic tests are more than outcomes of science or products of commerce, yet they cannot be reduced to culture or politics either. They are informed by and productive of gender ideologies and gendered experiences, but their relation to gender is implicit and shifting, as they rarely make explicit claims about gender. This disciplinary ambiguity at the heart of complex cultural phenomena like DTC genetics has provided both a challenge and a productive condition for scholars working in feminist cultural studies and feminist science studies, as suggested, respectively, by Sue Thornham in *Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies* (2000) and Maureen McNeil in *Feminist Cultural Studies of Science and Technology* (2007).

While inspired by Thornham's and McNeil's interrogations of the disciplinary origins and future trajectories of feminist engagement with culture and science, my primary interest is in the question of method in feminist cultural analysis. I work from the premise that cultural phenomena like DTC genetics require precise and sensitive tools of analysis that may capture both the contextual specificities and the abstract underlying tendencies. This is not, of course, to say that there has been no methodological debate in feminist cultural analysis. For example, Thornham (2000) and Nina Lykke (2010) provide insightful overviews of these inspired discussions, while Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen's edited book *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings* (2010) focuses on one recent methodological concern, the role of affect in the research process. However, such methodological interrogations seldom address a key question that underlies phenomena like DTC genetics: what are the structural and contextual conditions that make DTC genetics appear as desirable and necessary, and what is the relation between such conditions and gender ideologies?

This article explores narrative analysis as a means of examining this charged relationship between structural stability and contextual change in the production of gender ideologies. My proposition may seem unlikely considering the representation of narrative analysis in feminist discussions of method. First, narrative analysis is often dismissed as outmoded because it is understood as privileging universal structure over historically specific context. For example, in her excellent book on interdisciplinary research methods, Paula Saukko (2003) equates narrative analysis with 1960s and 1970s structuralism, which she critiques for being contextually insensitive. While 'the structuralist toolkit of methods, such as semiotics and narrative analysis, is good in highlighting certain key elements in cultural texts', Saukko (2003: 105) suggests, it does not provide a fully satisfactory method as 'the formulaic nature of the structuralist approach easily reinforces the machine-like and Manichean mode of thought it aims to

expose and criticize' (2005: 103). This tendency to link narrative analysis to a specific historical moment also underlies Lykke's (2010: 148) view of narrative analysis as an explicitly postmodern tool that is used to examine the linguistic construction of gendered subjects.

Second, narrative analysis is often invoked in connection with oral history and women's accounts of their experiences (see, for example, Lagesen, 2010; Letherby, 2003; Naples, 2003). While this approach connects narrative with the lived and the affective rather than the structural or the universal, narrative as a concept remains fairly untheorized, and is often understood simply as the synonym of a 'story' or an 'account'. Even when theoretically developed as in Leslie Rebecca Bloom's *Under the Sign of Hope* (1998), narrative refers to women's personal accounts rather than the complexities of cultural logics of narration. Third, the so-called material turn in gender studies, developed and advocated by Karen Barad, Elizabeth Grosz and others within feminist science studies in particular, has emphasized the ontology and biology of gender. While correctly challenging the absence of the material body in many text-based studies of gender, this feminist 'new materialism' has tended to privilege the embodied at the expense of the linguistic – a preference articulated, for example, by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman in their introduction to *Material Feminisms* (2008).

Instead of dismissing narrative analysis as merely structural (and thus unable to explain variation or context) or untheorized and personal (and thus unable to uncover the structural preconditions of gendered experience), I suggest that we develop methods of narrative analysis that may capture that tricky ground between structure and context. Indeed, I argue that narrative analysis differs from other methods of analysis such as discourse analysis or analysis of representations in its focus on the relation between structure and context. I understand structure as the persistent tendencies that allow certain kinds of discourses to take shape, that push narrative in particular directions. I view context as the culturally and historically specific conditions through which knowledge is produced and interpreted, conditions that cannot be separated from the theoretical and methodological choices in the research process. As structure privileges permanence and context favours change, the narrative site between structure and context is characterized by unresolved tensions.

In what follows, I first take a brief look at narrative as a theoretical concept. I then turn to DTC genetics, which I use to demonstrate the potential and limitations of narrative analysis as a feminist method. My investigation focuses on the commercial website of the UK-based company Oxford Ancestors, which sells mitochondrial and Y-chromosomal genetic ancestry tests. I use the website to explore three aspects of narrative: the mutual embeddedness of parallel narratives; narrative as a productive dynamic; and the relationship between narrative and context. While the website could be addressed through other feminist perspectives such as cyberfeminist interrogations of gender and sexuality (see, for instance, Elm and Sundén, 2007), I use narrative analysis, as my focus is not on the website as a virtual or interactive phenomenon, but on the cultural rationale that underlies genetic ancestry testing. Furthermore, by choosing a phenomenon that is not obviously narrative I want to demonstrate the applicability of narrative analysis beyond the usual range of narrative texts like films, novels and (auto)biographies. The fact that my example is not explicitly gendered allows me to highlight how narrative analysis

renders gender ideologies visible. Rather than ask whether gender should be seen as discursive or material, I trace some of the processes through which ideas of gender become naturalized.

## Theorizing narrative

Feminist narrative theory is a diverse field that includes psychoanalytical (de Lauretis, 1984; Winnett, 1990), (post)structuralist (Roof, 1996) as well as more culturally oriented (Homans, 1994; Page, 2007) approaches to gender and narrative. The kind of narrative analysis I propose builds on the latter two traditions, reflecting my own situatedness at the intersection of gender studies, science studies, cultural studies and post-structuralist literary theory. While my understanding of narrative arises from literary studies, I am interested in its application in the analysis of diverse cultural texts, as practised by scholars like Priscilla Wald (2000, 2006, 2008), José van Dijck (1998), Judith Roof (1996) or Bernice L Hausman (2000). In different ways, these scholars connect narrative analysis to wider cultural analysis, as they examine the narrative production of gender and sexuality. Most importantly, their work explores the connection between narrative and knowledge in the popularization of science, thereby contributing to both feminist cultural studies and feminist science studies.

Working from this background, I understand narrative as an implicit logic that organizes texts and images. As a 'set of ordering presumptions by which we make sense of perceptions, events, cause/effect relations (and even the idea that sense can be produced by a notion of cause/effect), and life', narrative 'permeates and orders any representation we make to ourselves or to others' (Roof, 1996: xv). Whereas 'discourse' refers to the historically specific vocabularies through which we make sense of the world, narrative covers both the explicit narrative manifestation (the specific story that is told) and its underlying logic (the organizing rationale that gives it shape). While the structural logic that underlies narratives resists easy revision, it may produce myriad different expressions in ever changing contexts. This multi-layeredness means that narrative cannot be pinned down to any particular genre such as the middle-brow novel or the Hollywood movie. Rather, narrative is always part of the larger cultural interpretative framework in which texts, images and discourses emerge and are made sense of. The ambivalent in-betweenness of narrative becomes evident, for example, in Wald's study of the 'outbreak narrative', the narrative of the emergence, spread and containment of infectious diseases. In *Contagious* (2008), Wald traces the ways in which the outbreak narrative both persists and mutates as it travels across cultural genres, temporal boundaries and geographical locations.

As an organizing logic, narrative is a textual engine that keeps the story going. Such a motor turns representation into particular spatially and temporally organized patterns, producing the sense of movement that we tend to identify with narrative. The familiarity of these patterns makes certain narrative events and textual outcomes seem likely while rendering others highly improbable. The narrative of romantic relationship, for example, is based on an easily recognizable narrative pattern, as many feminist scholars have shown (DuPlessis, 1985; Pearce and Stacey, 1995; Oikkonen, 2010). Organized on

a straightforward narrative trajectory, romance typically proceeds from an initial encounter and attraction between the prospective couple through a series of developments to a final critical point where the story either takes off or collapses. This sense of obviousness renders narrative an effective technology of knowledge. As van Dijk (1998: 15) puts it, '[t]he power of narrative is that it serves as a mode of cognition without it being itself recognizable as an interpretative framework'. However, different types of narratives have different outcomes. This is suggested, for example, by Gillian Beer's (2000) analysis of the fundamental ambiguity of Darwin's evolutionary narrative, or Ron Curtis's (1994) reading of the rhetorical appeal of the detective plot in popular science magazines. Narratives, then, are embedded in the working of ideology both through their discursive content and the historically specific ideological investments implicit in their very structures.

As means of knowledge production, narratives tend to generate facts about gender and sexuality. For Roof (1996), assumptions of gender and sexuality both organize narratives and emerge from the textual dynamic of narration. Combining Marxist, (post) structuralist and psychoanalytical frameworks, Roof views narrative and sexuality as locked in an apparently endless narrative circle in which 'our very understanding of narrative as a primary means to sense and satisfaction depends upon a metaphorically heterosexual dynamic within a reproductive aegis', a dynamic that stands for the very idea of a good story (Roof, 1996: xxii). This metaphoric privileging of reproductive heterosexuality projects epistemic authority on the symbolic conjoiner of opposite narrative elements such as characters, histories or aspirations, turning them into a promise of narrative futurity. Through this metaphoric connection between narrative and reproduction, narratives reinforce the very assumptions of gender and sexuality that made the reproductive narrative logic appear as natural in the first place.

Like Roof, Hausman (2000) views narrative as a fundamentally interdisciplinary phenomenon that exceeds its textual manifestation. However, while Roof emphasizes narrative's resistance to feminist and queer revision, Hausman examines narrative as a tool of both reactionary and progressive gender politics. Exploring the controversial 'John/Joan case' that concerned the reassignment of a young child's gender following a botched genital surgical procedure, Hausman draws a distinction between 'ontological' and 'epistemological' approaches to gender. These approaches differ in that '[g]ender ontologies narrate the status quo' whereas gender epistemologies 'offer deconstructive narratives that disseminate gender ontologies into irresolvability' (Hausman, 2000: 119). Thus, Hausman (2000: 118) concludes, '[o]nce we rethink gender in terms of narrativity, the important issue is how it (gender) functions as a culturally salient category of experience. And then all of the categories – gender, gender identity, and sex (etc.) – need to be treated as ideas rather than as facts.' Even if narrative tends to naturalize gender by producing structurally familiar accounts of gendered experience, the narrative means by which this process takes place can be exposed and challenged. Particularly interesting is Hausman's focus on the gendered body, as this allows her to highlight the intricate entanglement of the individual, contextual and structural in narratives of gender. This narrative entanglement, as we will see, also underlies the Oxford Ancestors website.

## Narrative intersections

Companies selling DTC genetics tend to specialize on a particular array of tests. These may include paternity tests, medically motivated tests for genetic mutations that increase susceptibility to certain diseases, or genealogy tests that trace the customer's prehistoric ancestry. These genealogy tests are further divided into genomic tests and genetic ancestry tests. While the former seek to determine an individual's proportional genomic inheritance (e.g. 65% European, 35% Native American), the latter trace maternal or paternal genealogies by examining, respectively, mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) passed from mother to all children or the non-recombining region of the Y-chromosome (NRY) passed from father to son.<sup>2</sup> Unlike nuclear DNA that is shuffled at each generation, non-recombining DNA registers the slow accumulation of mutations, which can be used to estimate the historical divergence of human populations.<sup>3</sup>

Oxford Ancestors is one of the over 20 businesses currently listed on the International Society for Genetic Genealogy's website as providing 'deep ancestry' services.<sup>4</sup> Established in 2000, it is also among the oldest biotechnical enterprises specializing in mitochondrial and Y-chromosomal ancestry tests. As its name suggests, the company seeks to identify with Oxford University, where its chair and founder Bryan Sykes works as a professor of human genetics. While companies like Oxford Ancestors present themselves as global in their reach, their prospective customers are primarily westerners (albeit from various ethnic groups), whose search for transnational origins takes place from the safe confines of the middle-class West and its past few decades of social and economic development. Indeed, as David Skinner correctly observes, '[t] here are important links here to changing values around consumption, personal development and individuality. Part of the appeal of these forms of genetic testing is the way that they appear to provide a means of reconciling increasingly individualized accounts of self-identity and the constitution of political communities in racialized form' (Skinner, 2006: 482).

Feminist narrative analysis allows us to situate genetic ancestry tests in this intersectional and cross-disciplinary terrain. It does this by locating the phenomenon within a web of cultural narratives. These narratives are not merely internal to the genetic ancestry websites; they are the culturally available rhetorical means through which genetic ancestry testing is produced as urgent and meaningful. Considering that the primary audience of DTC genetics is the western middle class, it is not surprising that they are also specifically western narratives.

To begin with, the Oxford Ancestors website, [www.oxfordancestors.com](http://www.oxfordancestors.com), invokes the cultural narrative of commercialization that depicts the past decades as characterized by the commodification of ever new entities such as tissues, cell lines or genes. The website positions itself as part of this narrative of commercialization through its vocabulary: it refers to 'customers', 'products', 'services' and provides links with titles such as 'Your Basket', 'Convert Currency' and 'Latest Prices'. The products themselves are trademarked, such as 'MatriLine™' (£180.00), 'Y-Clan™ service' (also £180.00) or 'MatriLine and Y-Clan DNA Combo' (£340.00). This narrative of commercialization is typically invoked by scholars who ponder on the ethics of viewing human genetic material in terms of patented ownership (Cahill, 2001; Everett, 2003; Kolb, 2007).

The Oxford Ancestors website also appropriates the cultural narrative of scientific advance. Building on the Enlightenment understanding of science as progress, contemporary versions of this narrative often cast the recent union of science and technology in biotechnology as the latest step in the search for the truth about our existence. The website invokes this narrative through the iconic image of the Oxford University campus at the top of each page, as well as through the first-person account of the scientific protagonist, Professor Sykes: 'Oxford Ancestors began in April 2000, in my university laboratory where I have been using DNA for the last two decades to explore our human origins and the migrations of our ancestors. It was, and remains, our intention to enable everyone to share in the excitement of what modern genetics can reveal about our own personal origins' ([www.oxfordancestors.com](http://www.oxfordancestors.com)). Here the history of Oxford Ancestors is paralleled with recent developments in science ('modern genetics'), so that the assumed success of Sykes's enterprise appears as the culmination of the narrative of science itself. Although this merging of personal and public histories produces a tension between first-person expertise ('my university laboratory', 'our intention') and the collective 'we' ('our human origins', 'our ancestors'), this tension invests expertise with personal appeal and the personal with a sense of authority.

The website also invokes the cultural narrative of personal quest that depicts modern existence as a troubled search for roots and relatedness. The website plays with the narrative variant that portrays science and technology as providing new means of discovering our true identities in the incoherent world. By framing their services as 'personal ancient ancestry research' ([www.oxfordancestors.com](http://www.oxfordancestors.com)), the website invokes the oxymoronic conjoiner of 'personal' and 'ancient', thus positing genetic genealogy as superior to both the considerable shortness of traditional family genealogy and the assumed emotional detachment of most genomics research. The website explicates this union of cutting-edge science and the identity project by referring to DNA as 'the most precious gift from your ancestors' ([www.oxfordancestors.com/content/view/20/38/](http://www.oxfordancestors.com/content/view/20/38/)), and by promising to use 'your precise DNA result . . . to assign you a place within the genealogy of the clan' ([www.oxfordancestors.com/content/view/35/55/](http://www.oxfordancestors.com/content/view/35/55/)). This positioning of genetic ancestry as the ultimate form of relatedness is reinforced by the act of naming the eight women – Ursula, Xenia, Helena, Velda, Tara, Katrine, Jasmine and Ulrike – from whom modern Europeans presumably descend.

What is particularly interesting about the website is how these three narratives run parallel and intersect. The narratives of commercialization, scientific advance and personal quest all play with ideas of progress versus regress. The narrative of science, as invoked on the website, posits population genomics as the culmination of a history of scientific discoveries leading to the present, which is understood as the logical outcome of the past. Similarly, the narrative of personal fulfilment builds on the conventional plot of quest and discovery, in which the final discovery appears as the desired outcome that renders the story satisfactory. The narrative of commercialization, by contrast, is commonly interpreted as a narrative of regress that tells the story of our loss of innocence, as the cherished signs of our individuality – genes, cells, gametes – become part of a neoliberal capitalist logic. Yet the way in which the three narratives are articulated through one another renders the narrative of commercialization a progress narrative. As scientific advance becomes equated with commercialization through the progressive

logic, commercialization appears as a necessary outcome of scientific advance. At the same time, commercialization emerges as the narrative engine that pushes the quest narrative towards its desired outcome, the intimately felt discovery. The otherwise suspect trend of commercialization thus appears as an act of generosity from the Oxford Ancestors scientists. This effect is reinforced by the narrative of scientific progress, which helps erase the inherent doubt that haunts the quest narrative.

As these examples suggest, narrative analysis is able to show how the meaning of a narrative is always a product of textual negotiations, in which both structural tendencies and contextual factors play a role. Context itself is, of course, an ambiguous term. On the one hand, it refers to the array of circulating cultural narratives, some of which may be explicitly reworked in a text, while others provide the intertextual environment through which phenomena take particular shape. In this sense, narratives never operate in a closed textual space, but open up to other narrative frameworks. On the other hand, context refers to the historically specific social and material circumstances that render particular narrative shapes meaningful in the first place. The narratives of commercialization, scientific progress and personal quest work rhetorically so well because their dynamics resonate with western cultural expectations of narrative movement. By examining the textual conditions in which narrative patterns are given meaning – for example, the contradictory appearance of commercialization as progress – we may witness how narrative operates as ‘a mode of cognition’ that turns ideas into facts (van Dijck, 1998: 15).

## **Making gendered facts**

On the Oxford Ancestors website, genetic ancestry is defined in strictly gendered terms, as suggested by the links to ‘Maternal Ancestry’ and ‘Paternal Ancestry’ in the page menu. This kind of gendering of ancestry is common to genetic genealogy services for practical reasons, as they engage primarily in mtDNA and NRY analysis. These two types of analysis, in turn, result from developments in population genomics in the 1980s and 1990s, where first mtDNA and then NRY provided a way to resolve the problem posed by recombination – the mixing of genetic material at each generation – characteristic of nuclear DNA. Yet, as Amade M’charek (2005) demonstrates, the often pragmatic reasons that lead to the naturalization of particular scientific techniques do not cancel out the effects that such techniques have on the formulation of future projects and non-scientific audiences’ view of genomics. Thus, the way in which Oxford Ancestors divides ancestry into maternal and paternal genealogies, commodified as ‘MatriLine’ and ‘Y-Clan’ services, reinforces the idea that finding one’s roots is a gendered experience.

Rather than examine the representation of gender differences on the website, I want to draw attention to how assumptions about gender – no matter what those assumptions are – arise from a narrative dynamic. Narrative analysis plays a crucial role here: by focusing on the effect of the narrative intersections outlined above, it captures processes through which facts about gender come into being. As for maleness, the ‘Paternal Ancestry’ page invokes the narratives of science and personal quest, as it equates genes with unforgeable singularity by promising ‘to reveal your Y-chromosome signature’ ([www.oxfordancestors.com/content/view/36/56/](http://www.oxfordancestors.com/content/view/36/56/)). Furthermore, the page draws a

connection between genomics and surname genealogy: ‘In many countries, surnames are also passed down from father to son, just like the Y-Chromosome. This means that you also can use your Y-Clan™ results to investigate your paternal lines alongside more traditional genealogical sources in a very powerful combination. . . . Our Chairman and founder, Prof Sykes, was the first scientist to establish this connection between surnames and Y-Chromosomes.’ If cultural narratives operate as each other’s structural justification, as suggested in the previous section, then the gender ideologies they reinforce also carry some of that structural appeal. Thus by invoking the narratives of science (‘the first scientist to establish’), personal fulfilment (‘from father to son’) and the inviolability of copyright (‘Y-Clan™’), the passage renders the gendered results of the NRY ancestry tests as seemingly irrefutable. Surname genealogy appears here as a parallel narrative of quest that verifies the masculinity of genetic ancestry while commending its epistemic superiority.

As for women, the ‘Maternal Ancestry’ page outlines a dual role for mitochondrial DNA as both the source of female identity and the end-product of a matrilineal historical narrative:

One striking finding was that people tended to cluster into a small number of groups, which could be defined by the precise sequence of their mtDNA. In native Europeans, for example, there were seven such groups, among Native Americans there were four, among Japanese people there were nine, and so on. Each of these groups, by an astounding yet inescapable logic, traced back to just one woman, the common maternal ancestor of everyone in her group, or clan. ([www.oxfordancestors.com/content/view/35/55/](http://www.oxfordancestors.com/content/view/35/55/))

The origins of gendered identity are posited here as the ultimate object of the personal quest by invoking the narrative of science (‘the precise sequence’), which in turn is represented as providing ‘an astounding yet inescapable logic’ able to locate gendered roots in global prehistory. This suggests a curious back-and-forth movement that renders retrospection a narrative motor. While the idea of looking back privileges the viewpoint of present-day genomics, thereby reinforcing the modern scientific interpretation of gender as based on molecular kinship, the prehistoric maternal past is nevertheless privileged as a source of knowledge from which both modern genders and modern science are seen as springing. Retrospection, then, is here a function of narrative, as implicated in the retrospective position is a narrative of progress that enables the very act of looking back. By drawing attention to this temporal dynamic, narrative analysis is able to reveal the mutual embeddedness of ideas of movement and knowledge.

In his rhetorical analysis of DTC genetics, Zoltan P Majdik (2009) identifies a logic of movement produced through the metaphor of ‘journey’ that closely resembles this retrospective striving for the past. According to Majdik, ‘the chronological resolution that these tests track through haplogroups can identify so-called “ancestors” only as parts of large blocks of time with an accuracy far below what would be required to pinpoint specific ancestors’ (Majdik, 2009: 591–592). The journey metaphor connects past to present by ‘highlight[ing] precise ancestors metonymically: they stand in as part of a more generalized and imprecise whole, and provide a close focus on specific ancestors that I can “follow” and situate precisely’ (Majdik, 2009: 592). Wald (2000) gives this temporal

dynamic a further twist in her analysis of the news coverage of a proposed connection between the bubonic plague and the resistance to HIV. According to Wald, genetic discourse follows the grammatical logic of future perfect. Such a logic projects the past onto the future in order to 'look forward as though looking back' (Wald, 2000: 699), to see 'what will have been' (Wald, 2000: 698). As Wald demonstrates, this temporal logic tends to organize cultural narratives about genomics and its social implications.

Crucially, this logic of retrospection-as-progress also produces facts about gender. Roof argues that the way in which narratives strive towards futurity, which in turn operates as a promise of a new beginning, invests the endpoint of a narrative with a sense of necessity, while rendering the point of origins as the only possible beginning (Roof, 1996: 1–40). The way in which the Oxford Ancestors website establishes taxonomies of modern people (such as the mitochondrial groups listed above) while rooting those taxonomies in the prehistoric world introduces a two-way link between prehistory and modernity that uses the past as evidence of the present and the present as evidence of the past. For example, the identification of prehistoric 'Y-clans' among modern males renders both the prehistoric origins and the current endpoint of the male evolutionary narrative as inevitable preconditions of masculinity. Thus, while the Oxford Ancestors website leaves the precise meanings of masculinity and femininity open, it nevertheless suggests that modern genders should be seen as products of two dichotomously gendered and teleologically invested histories that can be reduced to their molecular materialities.

What narrative analysis is able to do is to uncover the narrative logic that turns gendered ideas into facts about gender. In doing so, it also points to the processes through which narrative history becomes erased. Narrative analysis defamiliarizes the familiarity of narrative patterns, thus showing how a narrative ending always relies on the beginning of the narrative, and, conversely, how the obviousness of the beginning is produced through the end of the narrative. There is no satisfactory narrative endpoint or a satisfactory narrative beginning without a structurally satisfactory narrative trajectory. Narrative analysis allows us to examine the ambivalence of narrative trajectories by showing how narratives reach simultaneously towards the end and the beginning. This dual movement is further complicated by the intersections of narratives, which may result in one narrative mending the structural weaknesses of another. Finally, by focusing on the interdependence of narratives and narrative elements, narrative analysis can shed light on the connections between gender ideologies and ideas of time, movement, knowledge and authority.

## **Contextual politics**

My discussion of context has so far focused on the intersecting web of cultural narratives, and the key contribution of narrative analysis in understanding their rhetorical appropriation. I have viewed the Oxford Ancestors website as an intertextually resonant cultural entity that deploys and reinforces the narrative context within which it is situated. What about context beyond narrative? Can narrative analysis capture the material circumstances and the historical specificity that underlie narrative formations? The answer is yes and no. The way in which narrative is poised between structure and context makes narrative analysis a highly useful method in examining the

constraints and mutability of cultural phenomena. In the case of Oxford Ancestors, narrative analysis enables us to identify underlying patterns – the progressive versus regressive movement of narrative – as well as historically specific variations that such patterns engender – the molecularized matrilineal and patrilineal variants of the evolutionary narrative, for example. Thus, while the kind of narrative analysis proposed here does not address gendered experience, it captures the constant negotiations between structural constraints and potential for variation that underlie cultural phenomena, thereby highlighting the cultural preconditions that render particular experiences conceivable or desirable.

The narrative context that I construct while reading the website is, of course, not the only way of contextualizing the phenomenon. The context analysed above arises from a series of methodological and theoretical choices. As Mieke Bal observes, contextualization is an act of ‘framing’ that sets the object of study in a particular position, while also framing the person who is doing the framing (Bal, 2002: 133–173). Bal emphasizes that framing is, first and foremost, a verb, and therefore it ‘is performed by an agent who is responsible, accountable, for his or her acts’ (Bal, 2002: 135). Saukko, too, examines the politics of contextualization through the idea of *sites* – geographically, culturally and historically specific locations – and *scapes* – particular spheres of life such as ‘bodyscape’, ‘politicscape’, ‘technoscape’ or ‘sacredscape’ (Saukko, 2003: 176–197). Following Arjun Appadurai, Saukko understands sites and scapes as mutually embedded, so that ‘methodologically one can envision studying how different “sites” are connected with, and disconnected from, one another by diverse flows that articulate diverse “scapes”’ (Saukko, 2003: 177). Thus, even though ‘social phenomena may be closer to some “scape” than others . . . social phenomena can be studied from the perspective of different scapes, which yields rather different results’, highlighting the fact that all viewpoints are partial (Saukko, 2003: 185).

My focus on cultural narratives is itself an act of framing, as Bal sees it. Framing, in this sense, is not only a matter of invoking a particular ‘scape’ as described by Saukko, but of applying methodology – narrative analysis – that draws the attention to particular aspects of the studied phenomenon – in this case, narrative patterns invoked by the Oxford Ancestors website. Narrative analysis, that is, is a method of framing. Yet the point of view that narrative analysis provides is not limited to structural tendencies and constraints. Following Saukko’s use of sites and scapes, the genetic ancestry services can be seen as multi-sited phenomena, as their markets, legal commitments, financial structures and scientific procedures are, if not quite global, at least transnational. While the Oxford Ancestors website constitutes a single site of research, it is connected to numerous other sites through the ‘flow’ of customers, money, marketing strategies and scientific techniques. Furthermore, both the website and the wider phenomenon of DTC genetic ancestry testing are situated at the intersection of various scapes. These scapes include the ‘technoscape’, ‘financescape’, ‘bodyscape’ and ‘sacredscape’ listed by Saukko, as well as what could be called ‘sciencescape’.

The three narratives identified above coincide with these scapes: the narrative of commercialization is primarily concerned with ‘financescape’, the narrative of personal quest with ‘bodyscape’ and ‘sacredscape’, and the narrative of scientific advance with ‘technoscape’ and ‘sciencescape’ – although technology is always also about money, the

body always also about science, science always also about the sacred, and so on. Narrative analysis as developed in this article moves between social scapes, structural patterns and cultural objects. Such an approach is interested in the contested terrain between the various scapes through which cultural phenomena take shape and the structural aspects of narrative, such as the push towards futurity. Crucially, by turning to the tensions and tendencies that underpin these intersecting scapes, sites and narratives, narrative analysis may also point to the geopolitics that underlie the studied phenomenon. On the Oxford Ancestors website, for example, the same temporal narrative dynamic that produces gender as the origin, endpoint and organizing principle of genetic genealogy also equates Africa with the past, while the West, our privileged site of retrospection, represents the present and the future.<sup>5</sup> Although my investigation has focused on the narrative production of gender as molecular and dichotomous in DTC genetic ancestry tests, it would also be important to examine other elements of narrative dynamics, such as race, class or sexuality.

To conclude, the strength of narrative analysis lies in this ability to move between structure and context, to identify constraints in how narratives are poised between origins and futures, how only particular kinds of narrative trajectories appear as conceivable, and how assumptions about gender become naturalized. Narrative analysis is less interested in the specificities of these gender ideologies than in the narrative dynamic that engenders such naturalization. Crucially, the tendencies and constraints implicit in specific narratives are also suggestive of the tendencies and constraints that organize the various scapes – financescape, bodyscape, sacredscape, technoscape, sciencescape – that DTC genetic ancestry services appropriate. For example, the way in which narratives operate on the logic of progress versus regress may help us understand why the ‘flows’ of people, money, concepts and discourses between scapes and sites take place in a particular way and not another. Furthermore, the intersections of cultural narratives that narrative analysis identifies may be indicative of the ways in which financescape, bodyscape, sacredscape, technoscape and sciencescape are implicated in one another. Here, too, embeddedness is not merely a matter of discursive influence, but also of structural intertwining that affects what can be thought, imagined or experienced. Narrative analysis is particularly suited to tackle such multi-layeredness, because it moves between the abstract and the concrete, the variable and the invariable, the structural and the discursive. What narrative analysis provides is a way – albeit only one way – of examining the constitutive conditions of cultural phenomena.

This connection between structure and context is, of course, at the heart of the feminist project. Feminists have always been acutely aware that power and inequality are structural, historical as well as personal questions, that institutional structures affect individual lives, and that personal experiences take shape in everyday negotiations regarding structural constraints and possibilities. The key contribution of narrative analysis to feminist methodologies is the ability to trace, dissect and reimagine the contested yet productive tensions from which scapes, sites and narratives emerge.

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## Notes

1. All these issues can, of course, be studied within other disciplines. However, these are the disciplines that the phenomena are typically associated with. I focus in this article on cultural phenomena that lack such a primary association.
2. For a very helpful discussion of mtDNA and NRY ancestry tests and their ethical, legal, commercial and cultural implications, see Wagner (2010).
3. While Y-chromosomal DNA is located in the cell nucleus, it does not, for the most part, participate in recombination, as it is always paired with an X-chromosome.
4. See [www.isogg.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_DNA\\_testing\\_companies](http://www.isogg.org/wiki/List_of_DNA_testing_companies) for the list (accessed 12 September 2012).
5. See Wald (2006) for a detailed critique of this representation of Africa as belonging to the past.

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