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The Inconvenient Ancestor: Slavery and Selective Remembrance on Genealogy Television

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**The Inconvenient Ancestor:  
Slavery and Selective Remembrance on Genealogy  
Television**

**Matthew Elliott**

In more than ten years of genealogy television programming, no revelation about a celebrity's ancestry has captured the media's attention quite like that of Ben Affleck's third great-grandfather, Benjamin Cole. Ironically, Cole became famous for being forgotten, as he was omitted from Affleck's segment on *Finding Your Roots* ("Roots of Freedom") after Affleck, as he later explained on Facebook, "lobbied" executive producer and host Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to remove the story because he was "embarrassed" "to include a guy who owned slaves" in a televised version of his family history. When the story of this very personal effort to evade slavery and ancestral slaveholding became public as a consequence of the Sony email leaks in spring 2015, it initiated a month-long media frenzy. The controversy also illuminated the increasing presence of genealogy in popular culture and the shaping influence it has begun to have on popular history and identity.

In the press, Affleck was lambasted as "dumb" (Cohen) and "wrong" (Smith) for seeking to hide this revelation of ancestral slaveholding. Yet, some also defended him, such as Dean Obeidallah, who asked "Who would not want to cover that up?" Still others, such as Ty Burr in *The Boston Globe*, suggested that the topic itself may be unworthy of public discussion, a "non-story" for anyone who does not "care about celebrities or how any of us come to terms with inconvenient family histories." Even as the controversy quickly faded, doing little long-term damage to the players involved or to the popularity of the show, the effort to suppress a genealogical story about slavery clearly struck a cultural nerve, and the divergent responses reveal a lack of consensus on the subject. How do we come to terms with our "inconvenient" ancestors, especially slaveholding ancestors? Furthermore, what role

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does genealogy television now play in shaping the public discourse around slavery, particularly through its use of selective remembering? With a focus on *Finding Your Roots*, in particular, including the leaked but never aired original version of the Ben Affleck episode, this essay addresses these questions and strives to shed some light on how genealogy television is shaping the way slaveholding ancestors are both remembered as well as conveniently evaded in contemporary American culture.

Just as Burr called Affleck's ancestry a "non-story," scholars have long dismissed genealogy as an unworthy subject for cultural or academic analysis. As recently as 2013, historian Francois Weil could reasonably proclaim that genealogy was "arguably the element of contemporary American culture about which we know the least" (2). However, the past several years have seen a significant increase in critical attention to the subject, as scholars from across the disciplines have begun to examine the cultural significance of this increasingly popular pastime. Despite genealogy's history as a form of status-seeking for the aspiring elite, since the *Roots* era of the late 1970s, genealogy has been propelled by the individual pursuit of "self-understanding" (Weil 203) and efforts at "self-making" (Kramer, "Kinship" 380; Nelson 76). As a cultural practice, genealogy thus exists at an intersection of history and identity, as individuals look to discover unknown information from their family histories as a way of shaping their contemporary identities. Genealogy is indeed a "way of writing history" (Saar 232; Bishop 394), but its historical narratives are highly personalized and intended to shape the way subjects see themselves and are "counted by others" (Saar 236).

While the search for self-understanding has been at the core of genealogy for decades, more recent developments in data and DNA technologies have transformed both the practice and the perception of genealogy, leading not only to its extraordinary growth in popularity but also to the increased interest in the subject among scholars. Those genealogists of earlier eras who toiled away in the dusty archives surely never could have imagined the genealogy of today, one that intersects with big data, DNA science, big business, and even entertainment and celebrity culture. Prominent scholars

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now reference the “contemporary obsession with ancestry” (Wald 263) and describe “origin seeking” as “something of a national pastime” (Nelson 5).

Not only is genealogy reported to be among the most popular search terms on the internet, but popular culture is saturated with origin stories and genealogical data (Zerubavel 4). Advertisements for web-based ancestry companies pervade mass media with promises that “your story is waiting to be discovered” (Ancestry.com) in their online archives, and even traditional news sources such as the nightly news or the major daily newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* increasingly cover genealogy-based stories like Barack Obama’s ancestral connection to Dick Cheney or Michele Obama’s slave ancestry, as well as the more politically-charged “birther” debates and the more recent political attacks and counter-attacks focused alternatively on Elizabeth Warren’s and even Donald Trump’s ancestry claims.

Still, the most visible platform for personal origin stories remains genealogy-based television shows. Now an established television genre that broadcasts on five continents, genealogy television commenced in 2004 with the original BBC version of *Who Do You Think You Are?* The popularity of the British show established the widely-used celebrity interview format and spawned numerous spin-offs, including the U.S. version, broadcast originally by NBC (2010-2012) and later TLC (2013-2016). Even before *Who Do You Think You Are?* arrived in the U.S., PBS staked out a market for a more academic approach to genealogy television, with scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., using genealogy-focused interviews with celebrities and other public figures as the hook for documentary-style narratives about broader themes and neglected segments of U.S. history in *African American Lives* (2006, 2008), *Faces of America* (2010), and *Finding Your Roots*. (2012, 2014, 2016), among others. Taken together, these various franchises have provided more than twelve seasons and well over a hundred celebrity-genealogy segments in just over ten years.

With frequent commercial and corporate tie-ins that promote the business of genealogy, these shows do more than just model or even shape contemporary genealogy. Rather, such prominent

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genealogical narratives have far-reaching effects in a contemporary cultural context where “normative views” of identity, kinship, and ancestry are being re-imagined (Wailoo, Nelson, and Lee 8), such as in the increased focus on DNA as the source of individual characteristics. As historian Matthew Frye Jacobsen notes, genealogy may involve a “politics of identity” for the individual, but when millions become involved as participants and observers, it also becomes about “the politics of heritage for the nation at large” (6).

Yet, even as the contexts and cultural stakes of genealogy have clearly changed in recent years, the fundamental process of constructing a family tree remains largely the same as it has always been. One of the central elements of this process is what sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel calls “selective remembrance” (10). Such acts of selective remembrance are inevitable when faced with the sheer number of possible paths one may take into the maze of any ancestry. Because everyone’s biological ancestors double each generation heading backwards into the past, roots-seekers face many choices, whether conscious or not, about where to focus their genealogical research. For example, most U.S.-born individuals inherit their surname from their father, and many seek information about that ancestral line due to this shared name. However, only three generations back, the focus on one’s surname-sharing great-grandfather comes at the exclusion of seven alternative great-grandparents who share the same biological distance to the subject, regardless of their different surnames. Going another five generations back, that surname-based ancestral line still represents a single individual, a sixth great-grandfather, but at this stage, that single ancestor is one out of 256, representing less than half of one percent of one’s direct ancestry from that generation alone.

Furthermore, when information about any researched ancestor is discovered, one again faces many implicit if not explicit choices about the information uncovered and whether it will be noted, remembered, or possibly even incorporated into one’s sense of self. In this way, newly discovered ancestors come to be acknowledged or disavowed, perhaps even “forgotten or disowned,” as Anne Marie Kramer writes (“Kinship” 392, 382). Genealogy, therefore, is more than just the “passive documenting of who our ancestors

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were” (Zerubavel 10). Rather, it is the active construction of who they were and who they are now to their present-day ancestors. As Zerubavel states, genealogists never just discover ancestors; rather, they construct narratives that enable “[us] to actually make them our ancestors” (10).

In genealogy television, these traditionally private acts of ancestral remembrance and forgetting are put on display and dramatized for maximum audience interest. Not only are ancestors selected by the shows for their story’s potential emotional power, but they are presented to the subjects on screen without forewarning in order to prompt authentic emotional responses, whether excitement, anger, or sadness, all of which frequently result from these ancestral “big reveals,” as such scenes have come to be known in reality television. In the case of celebrities like Ben Affleck, the tension and the stakes of these scenes are further heightened because the subjects have well-known and carefully crafted public images to maintain. Thus, when a celebrity appears to have his or her sense of self shaken by the introduction of unknown ancestral information, an experience that Nelson calls “genealogical disorientation” (84), audiences experience the added thrill of witnessing unscripted emotion and being introduced to a version of the celebrity’s personal identity that differs from the typical public image. In fact, Kramer’s study of audience responses concludes that audiences are most receptive to just such a display of “authenticity” from celebrities on the show. Thus, it is not the genealogical data itself but the celebrity’s reaction to it that, according to the study, accounts for the success or failure of an episode (Kramer, “Mediatizing Memory” 438).

For the most part, genealogy television serves less as a disorienting challenge to the celebrity’s public persona and more as a form of affirmation. In fact, beyond using genealogy to *make* ancestors through selective remembrance, as Zerubavel says, in the case of celebrity genealogy on television, ancestors are often presented in ways that appear designed to reflect the celebrity subject, with a newly discovered ancestor functioning as a mirror of the genealogical subject or at least some dimension of his or her identity. This is done by highlighting connections and affinities between

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the ancestor and the celebrity, whose characteristics are already well-known by many viewers. Such similarities range from mere coincidences to personal characteristics and to values and beliefs, but, in each case, the respective show strongly implies that there is a distinctive family connection that bonds the subject to the ancestor, regardless of the historical or biological distance between them. In this way, genealogy television uses what Kramer calls the “idiom of the family” to evade the many inevitable differences between the individual and the ancestor, as well as between the past and the present (Kramer, “Mediatizing Memory” 431). These differences of individuality are blurred and the gaps and ruptures of history are smoothed over as the newly discovered figures are declared part of the family, signaling a newly constructed collective identity, an “imagined community” of kin (Zerubavel 11; Bennett 7). In turn, the vast majority of the show’s guests, celebrities and otherwise, embrace the logic along with their new family, often echoing some version of the favorite refrain of the genre: “I have found my people.”

The trope that best exemplifies this blurring of the past with the present is that of physical resemblance. For example, in season 2 of *Finding Your Roots*, a segment on Pastor Rick Warren uses his resemblance to his great-grandfather Reverend Ebenezer Armstrong to this effect. Early in the episode, the show displays a picture of Armstrong, and Gates notes “how much Rick resembled Pastor Ebenezer” (“Angela Buchdahl, Rick Warrren, and Yasir Qadhi”). As sociologist Jennifer Mason has argued, such resemblances among kin tend to be perceived to be “fixed affinities,” as they are easily associated with biology and seen as visual proof that certain traits have been passed down largely unchanged from one relative to another. However, *Finding Your Roots* uses the image to subtly imply that Warren’s identity is more deeply rooted even than this visual connection to his great-grandfather suggests. With the still photo of Armstrong filling the screen for a full 37 seconds, an unusually lengthy period of time for a still picture, Warren and Gates provide voiceover narration that goes far beyond “Pastor Ebenezer” and into Warren’s “long line of deeply religious ancestors,” which Gates explains leads all the way back to colonial Boston.

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Thus, in this case, the physical resemblance between Warren and his great-grandfather, though striking, becomes the signifier for a much larger claim. This fixed affinity implies a continuum wherein Warren, a prominent religious figure today, is just the latest in this line of accomplished pastors that extends far back into history. On the contrary, the physical resemblance between Warren and his great-grandfather reveals nothing of substance about Warren's connection to colonial Boston, nor does it reveal anything about his similarities or differences to the other hundreds of ancestors between then and now to whom he is related.

Similarly, in an episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?* ("Susan Sarandon"), the resemblance between Susan Sarandon and her grandmother, Anita, plays a key role in that segment's narrative. Like many episodes of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, this episode introduces a personal conflict in the celebrity's life and then offers a narrative of healing through genealogical discoveries and claims of ancestral affinity (Lynch 110-114). In this case, the story focuses on Sarandon's long absent and now deceased grandmother, Anita, who abandoned Sarandon's mother at the age of 2, and it constructs a healing narrative around character affinities and life choices that bring the movie star and her grandmother together. A former New York "showgirl," Anita is re-integrated into an ancestral continuum through the interpretation of her as "unorthodox" and a "risk taker" who performed on stage and entered into an unconventional relationship (in her case, a "mixed marriage"), all of which are descriptions that link her life to Sarandon's, who is known for her feminist politics and resistance to gender norms in her personal life, yet the story only comes to a conclusion after the discovery of a photograph that serves as a sign of fixed affinity. Presented with a glamour shot of Anita as a showgirl, Sarandon pairs it with a playbill head shot from her own past, and the two images, placed side by side on screen, appear strikingly similar, thus enacting a visual coming together of grandmother and granddaughter that signifies a healing of the fractured family through the recognition of shared traits.

As in both the Warren and Sarandon episodes, the very traits that distinguish the celebrity subjects in the public eye are typically



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the same traits that serve as the focus of their ancestor's tale, thus implying that their success is due at least in part to a family trait passed down to them. Indeed, this logic is evident in dozens of other episodes, with everything from professional inclinations to shared talents and abilities, like sports and music, and even to shared character qualities, such as strength and resilience becoming defined as a family trait that has been gifted to the contemporary subjects from their ancestors. For example, on *Who Do You Think You Are?*, just as Sarandon's risk-taking personality is portrayed as an ancestral trait, so is Vanessa Williams' barrier breaking, Ashley Judd's "rabble rousing," Kelly Clarkson's boat rocking, and numerous other subjects' self-proclaimed qualities, including "drive" (Emmitt Smith), spirituality (Gwyneth Paltrow), and an "entrepreneurial spirit" (Spike Lee and Tim McGraw, respectively). Furthermore, in *Who Do You Think You Are?* especially, there is little room for coincidence, as even such idiosyncratic decisions such as Brooke Shield's choice of a major (French), Matthew Broderick's movie selection (*Glory*), and Spike Lee's character name (Mars Blackmon) are portrayed as the mysterious hand of their ancestry acting upon them in their everyday lives.

While *Finding Your Roots* avoids this use of what Mason calls "ethereal affinities" (37) to construct ancestral narratives, it nevertheless also frequently suggests, though with more subtlety, that its guests' distinguishing qualities have been "passed down" through the generations and "molded [them] in ways they could have never imagined" ("Born Champions"), resulting in their contemporary "accomplishments [that] can be traced back" ("Barbara Walters and Geoffrey Canada") to various ancestors' characteristics, lives, and decisions. Still, on occasion, Gates' enthusiasm seems to get the better of him, and his propensity for subtlety is abandoned for more overtly reductive statements, such as the occasional assertion that "you are your ancestors" ("Samuel L. Jackson, Condoleezza Rice, and Ruth Simmons"; Miller). A statement such as this one, which insists upon a deep natural affinity between subject and ancestor, is exactly what makes the stakes so high when an inconvenient ancestor like Benjamin Cole is introduced. Indeed, how can one effectively disavow an inconvenient ancestor on a show that

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insists that “you are your ancestors”?

The answer to this question is built into the format of genealogy television. Indeed, when it comes to the sensitive issue of a white celebrity’s slaveholding ancestors, *Finding Your Roots* and other genealogy shows try to have it both ways: to exploit the drama but also diffuse the awkwardness created by the revelation and protect the celebrity from any significant embarrassment. Thus, there are several common strategies that *Finding Your Roots* and other shows frequently use to diffuse the tension created by the introduction of inconvenient ancestors, and just like the pervasive affinity claims that make these tropes necessary, they too rely on selective remembrance.

For example, when inconvenient ancestors are introduced on genealogy television, they are almost always presented as singular or exceptional cases in the subject’s family history, suggesting that they were the lone ancestor who owned slaves. This focus on the inconvenient ancestor’s individuality avoids the implication that he or she may well be part of a more extensive pattern in a family history, as was often true with slaveholding, which was usually a multi-generation enterprise. Such is the case in Affleck’s original segment, which presents Cole in this way, despite the fact that he is described as an owner of more than twenty slaves, putting him among the 10% largest owners of slaves in 1850 (“Roots of Freedom”). With no broader historical context provided to explain a past or future relationship between Cole’s family and the institution of slavery, one may easily get the impression that he was the lone slaveholder in this particular branch of Affleck’s family tree.

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Affleck either left the filming believing that Cole was the only slaveholder in his family history or that he conveniently adopted this view in the days that followed the public exposure of the suppressed Benjamin Cole story, as he states “After an exhaustive search of my ancestry . . . it was discovered that one of my distant relatives was an owner of slaves” (Affleck). Of course, his implication here is that the show must have looked far and wide to find one slaveholding ancestor. Yet, further genealogical research in the wake of the controversy suggested that Cole was no exception; rather, he was

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part of an extensive history of slaveholding in his family (Blue-stone). Furthermore, slavery appears to have been quite common among Affleck's ancestors more generally, with sources stating that slaveholding spanned four generations and included as many as 14 individuals who owned more than 200 slaves (Leahy). Thus, by selectively focusing on Cole, *Finding Your Roots* may have been significantly downplaying the extent of slaveholding in Affleck's family history. Still, it speaks to the difficulty of balancing the show's need for drama with its desire to comfort the celebrity guests that even this apparent effort to downplay the significance of slaveholding in Affleck's family history apparently was not enough to prevent him from feeling that the show was setting out to embarrass him.

Another common technique employed by genealogy television to lessen the blow of the discovery of inconvenient ancestors is to frame the celebrity's segment as a redemption narrative. This again was the approach taken in the original Affleck segment, and it also characterizes *Finding Your Roots* episodes with Ken Burns, Kyra Sedgwick, Kevin Bacon, and many others, as well as Zooey Deschanel's episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?* In each of these cases, the inconvenient ancestor's story is juxtaposed with inspiring stories of other ancestors who fought for racial or social justice. These redemption narratives allow the subject to claim and even celebrate an alternative narrative, enabling the inconvenient ancestor to be more easily disavowed and forgotten.

For example, on *Who Do You Think You Are?* actor Zooey Deschanel learns that her fifth great-grandfather Thomas Henderson owned a slave, yet while startling to Deschanel, this fact serves as little more than a preface to the central story of the episode, that of Henderson's daughter, Sarah, who becomes an abolitionist and a participant in the Underground Railroad. An example of the selectiveness of genealogy in action, neither Deschanel nor the show ever again addresses Thomas Henderson after his relevance to the family line is dismissed with the simple statement by Deschanel that Sarah "must have taken after her mother," who did not bring any slaves into the marriage and grew up in an anti-slavery Quaker community. On the other hand, Deschanel also heaps praise upon

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her abolitionist fourth great-grandmother, saying “I couldn’t have imagined I came from such heroes.” She further claims this selective ancestral history by highlighting her own progressive politics and asserting that seeing “how far back it goes is really exciting and inspiring” (“Zoey Deschanel”).

In *Finding Your Roots*, Gates even plays an active role in encouraging such interpretations. In Kyra Sedgwick’s segment (“Kevin Bacon and Kyra Sedgwick”), for example, a new twist is given to the well-established history of Theodore Sedgwick, a New England revolutionary and early abolitionist who is also her fourth great-grandfather. The revelation that Theodore Sedgwick once owned slaves effectively unsettles this treasured family history for Kyra and her father, and Gates even admits that he too was “flabbergasted” by this unknown piece of a well-known history. Yet, in Gates’ words, Theodore Sedgwick’s later actions in support of abolition prove “powerfully redemptive.” Similarly, in Kevin Bacon’s segment in the same episode, Gates again insists on a redemptive conclusion. Here Bacon’s inconvenient ancestor’s story is linked to another in his ancestral line, both of whom were Pennsylvania Quakers, though they were separated by three generations. Nevertheless, the actions of Bacon’s great-grandmother, who is revealed to have been a teacher of freed slaves during Southern Reconstruction, symbolically functions to redeem his earlier slaveholding ancestor. Summing up, Gates says, “Your family has come a long way, Kevin, since your sixth great-grandfather tried to hold on to those slaves.”

Similarly, the Affleck episode opens with a story about Affleck’s mother’s involvement in the Civil Rights movement, and in the original version, this story was to serve as a touchstone in his segment. As Gates puts it, Affleck’s mother, Chris Affleck, represents “the roots of his family’s interest in social justice.” Thus, following the Benjamin Cole slaveholding reveal, Gates urges Affleck to “consider the irony . . . in your family line,” noting that his mother would “[fight] for the rights of black people in Mississippi, 100 years later.” “That’s amazing,” Gates adds, and Affleck affirms this sentiment, saying “That’s pretty cool” (Bluestone). This redemption claim ultimately proved to be a rather significant exaggeration.

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Although Chris Affleck did go to Mississippi in 1965 and participated in civil rights activities in an atmosphere of extraordinary racial tension, she was not “there at the time” of the 1964 freedom summer, as Gates claims, nor was she “colleagues” with the three civil rights volunteers who were murdered in June 1964 (Getler). Thus, in this case, the show moves beyond selective remembrance and into the even more troubling territory of historical inaccuracy or distortion for the sake of the celebrity subject’s comfort with his family history.

One final strategy for diffusing the tension created by the inconvenient ancestor is the insistence that descendants bear no responsibility for their ancestry. “You are not responsible for your ancestors,” Gates often says at such moments in the show. On the one hand, this statement represents a well-accepted assumption not just in genealogy television but in genealogy in general. As the historian Edward Ball explains in *Slaves in the Family*, his classic and exhaustive study of both the slaveholders and the slaves in his own ancestry, “a person cannot be culpable for the acts of others, long dead, that he or she could not have influenced.” He adds, though, that, although not “responsible,” one should be “accountable, called on to try to explain it” (14). In contrast, the insistence that “you are not responsible for your ancestors” is used on genealogy television with no such caveat. In fact, it is merely a quick and easy way out of the awkwardness, a way to lessen the tension that has been built up through the “big reveal.” Furthermore, in Gates’ case in particular, the statement contradicts his insistence elsewhere that “you are your ancestors,” thus suggesting how conveniently ancestral connections are made and undone.

Still, even with these contradictions and evasions, genealogy television has the potential to do significant cultural work, and *Finding Your Roots* provides a good example of both the advantages and disadvantages of using this genre to try alter the popular cultural discourse or public history of slavery. An extension of the project Gates started with *African American Lives*, *Finding Your Roots* focuses on the central role of slavery in U.S. history, using public figures’ ancestries, and even his own family history, to illuminate a continuum that extends from the history of slavery into the present.

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However, on Gates' prior shows, as well as in the less common cases when slavery is addressed on other genealogy programs, stories about slavery are limited almost exclusively to the genealogy of African-American subjects, with the discovered ancestors having been enslaved and their recovery representing a form of "reconciliation and repair" (Nelson 95). In turning an increased attention to white slaveholding ancestors, *Finding Your Roots* breaks from this convention and puts a spotlight on this rarely explored lineage in genealogy television, as well as in American culture in general.

In fact, this effort to draw a connection between contemporary whiteness and the history of U.S. slavery serves as a broader corrective to the routine evasions of slavery that have long characterized the heritage discourse. As Jacobson argues, the white ethnic revival of the 1970s provided an enthusiasm for "ethnic particularity" in genealogy research, and, as a consequence or perhaps even a cause, that new focus also contributed to the increasing obscurity of white slaveholding ancestors in genealogy over the past several decades. Ironically, Alex Haley's *Roots* and the subsequent mini-series helped to propel this turn to ethnicity in genealogy and even provided one of its core concepts, the romanticized non-U.S. homeland. Of course, in *Roots*, the tracing of an ancestral line to an African homeland requires a reckoning with slavery and the middle passage, while narratives focused on white ethnic origins typically follow a very different ancestral and historical path, leading not to slavery and slaveholders in the family history but to Ellis Island and immigrant ancestors. Thus, this shift signaled a redefinition of, in Jacobson's words, "normative whiteness" from "Plymouth Rock whiteness to Ellis Island whiteness" (7). In genealogical terms, this translates to an increased attention to the Ellis Island-type of ancestor, the late nineteenth or twentieth century immigrants whose roots are located in an alternative homeland, such as Ireland or Italy, from which they were likely forced to flee due to difficult or oppressive conditions. This attention comes at the expense of the "Plymouth Rock" ancestor, who signifies a claim to a national origin story but, as a consequence of that, also represents the "violent history of the settler democracy in the making long before the first immigrants of the . . . Ellis Island variety ever came ashore" (Jacobson 9).

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This cultural privileging of the Ellis Island ancestor may even have informed Ben Affleck's expectations about genealogy coming into his appearance on *Finding Your Roots*. In the opening interview of the show, Affleck explains that ancestry was "a blank canvas" for him, not something he had thought much about. However, when prompted by Gates to venture a guess as to what he may find in the process of researching his roots, thoughts of any ancestral link to slaveholders or any other inconvenient ancestors clearly do not cross his mind. Based only on his upbringing in Boston and its large Irish-American population, Affleck is quick to conclude it likely that "there's some part of that [Irish ancestry] there," thus comfortably locating himself within the dominant discourse of the ethnic revival. In this case, however, the comfort of claiming an Ellis Island ancestor was not to be, and the result of the research into his family history, instead, appears to have been, for him, one of considerable genealogical disorientation.

Others on the show have responded quite differently than Affleck, and some moments in the show even suggest, at least in a limited way, that it may, in fact, have the ability to affect the way some white Americans think about their relationship to slavery. For example, in contrast to Affleck, many other white celebrity guests in Season 2 of *Finding Your Roots* seem to anticipate their inconvenient ancestor's big reveal, apparently having watched the show before or been better prepped than Affleck was in coming on the show. Indeed, guests such as Kevin Bacon, Kyra Sedgwick, Anderson Cooper, and Ken Burns seem to see what is coming in these moments, exclaiming "uh oh" or "oh, no" in anticipation of it. In Bacon's case, he even jokes to Gates that "it did cross my mind," when asked if he was surprised by the revelation of slave owners in his family history, thus suggesting that it occurred to him precisely because the show so often addresses the issue and brings these ancestral continua to light. Thus, in this case, the pattern of remembering slavery in white family histories seems to have prompted the guest to think about slavery in a new way, prior even to having it dramatically exposed in the big reveal. If, as Jerome De Groot argues, celebrities' engagement with their family history on television comes to "stand for so many others" (440), then Bacon's

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shift in awareness also may be indicative of the show's consciousness-shaping impact on many viewers as well.

In fact, on *Finding Your Roots*, white celebrities repeatedly respond to the story of their slaveholding ancestors by saying, "I've never heard that story before." In one such moment, Ken Burns thoughtfully adds, if "you don't talk about it, . . . the next generation forgets it" ("Our American Storytellers"). Likewise, on a rare episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?* that focuses on a white actor's slaveholding ancestors, Bill Paxton states, "I want my children to learn this history, not hide the bad parts" ("Bill Paxton"). In such cases, genealogy television can help to provide a space to begin to talk about slaveholding ancestors and the legacy of slavery in general in a more personal way. As former Brown University President Ruth Simmons says in her segment of *Finding Your Roots* ("Samuel L. Jackson, Condoleezza Rice, and Ruth Simmons"), such efforts help to bring this discussion "into the public square." Ideally, though, these shows might push the conversation beyond taking comfort in feeling "not responsible" for the past. Rather, they may ultimately move subjects to embrace Edward Ball's assertion that one should be accountable to the past and engage in acts not just of remembering but also reflection and explanation.

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