

HOME > RESOURCES > CAN GENETICS CHANGE HOW WE VIEW RACE?

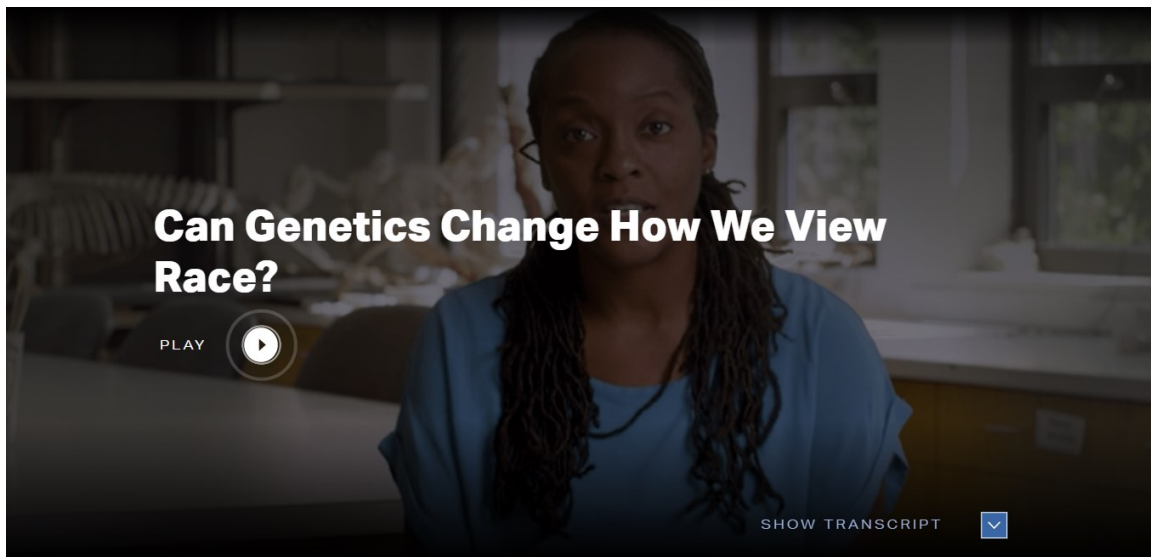
# Can Genetics Change How We View Race?

Dr. Jada Benn-Torres is a researcher and Professor of Anthropology at Vanderbilt University, where she is leading a team to help understand genetic anthropology and how it relates to race.

DATE PUBLISHED  
February 10, 2022

VIDEO  
EVOLUTION & LIFE SCIENCES  
GENETICS & EPIGENETICS  
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

[WATCH THE ENTIRE SERIES](#)



Dr. Jada Benn-Torres is a researcher and Professor of Anthropology at Vanderbilt University, where she is leading a team to help understand genetic anthropology and how it relates to race. Her findings have shown that there is more that unites us as humans, and that science can help change our concept of race and how we identify ourselves as humans. Genetics has helped changed the narrative on race, and our collective humanity in a very beautiful way.

Featured Scholar:

Dr. Jada Benn Torres is an American genetic anthropologist. She is also an associate professor of anthropology at Vanderbilt University and serves as the Director of Vanderbilt's Laboratory of Genetic Anthropology and Biocultural Studies.

## VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

ENGLISH

You know, genetic anthropologists do a wide variety of things, but ultimately the idea is to understand more about human experience. When we were, how we are now, to remember when we haven't done right, how we've harmed one another. I think it serves a purpose in helping us to remember this is who we are. This is what we want to be.

In terms of my own work in the Caribbean, that actually comes from my father. He was an avid genealogist and he would actually tell me stories that his mother told him about where our family was from. So I sort of

picked things up where he left it off by incorporating DNA to make connections between those in the Caribbean and those in West Africa. Aspects of life that have been broken as a result of, like, colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade.

One thing I'm seeing more, not only in anthropology but also in fields like public health, is a specific move to do community engaged work, where the research isn't done for research's sake or some higher and lofty goals, but instead is keeping the community central. I was told in another island by one of my field work assistants that identifying as indigenous at some point was seen as a bad thing to do. It meant that, you know, you were less intelligent, promiscuous, all those sort of negative labels. Um, and she said seeing me, like repeatedly – I went back a couple of times – doing this and talking about the community as though they were there and survived, she said it was giving her pause and made her think about who she was and how she identified and sort of that history around why it was seen as a bad thing when it wasn't.

Genetics adds to the narrative. In some cases it can upend the narrative, and really cause us to question, um, what we think we know.

## SPANISH

Bueno, los antropólogos genetistas hacen una gran variedad de actividades, pero en definitiva, la idea es comprender más acerca de la experiencia humana. Cuando estuvimos, cómo estamos ahora, recordar cuándo no actuamos bien, cómo hemos herido al otro. Creo que cumple el propósito de ayudarnos a recordar que esto es quienes somos. Esto es lo que queremos ser.

Con respecto a mi propio trabajo en el Caribe, en realidad, viene de mi padre. Él era un genealogista apasionado y solía contarme historias que su madre le contó sobre de dónde provenía nuestra familia. Entonces, en cierto modo, retomé las cosas donde él las dejó e incorporé ADN para hacer conexiones entre aquellos en el Caribe y aquellos en el oeste de África. Aspectos de la vida que se habían roto como consecuencia de, por ejemplo, el colonialismo y el mercado de esclavos transatlántico.

Algo que estoy viendo más, no solo en la antropología sino en ámbitos como la salud pública, es un movimiento específico para hacer trabajo comprometido con la comunidad, en el que la investigación no se hace por interés de los investigadores o por algún objetivo alto y sublime; en cambio, se centra en la comunidad. En otra isla, una de mis asistentes de trabajo de campo me contó que calificar a alguien de indígena, en algún punto, estaba mal visto. Eso significaba que eras menos inteligente, promiscuo, y toda clase de rótulos negativos. Eh, y ella me dijo que verme haciendo esto, una y otra vez, ya que regresé un par de veces, y hablando acerca de la comunidad como si estuvieran allí y hubiesen sobrevivido, le daba una pausa y le hacía pensar acerca de quién era y de cómo se identificaba y acerca de esa historia en torno a por qué estaba visto como algo malo cuando no lo era.

La genética aporta al relato. En algunos casos, puede poner de cabeza al relato y realmente hacernos preguntar, eh, qué creemos saber.



DoSER



*Facilitating dialogue and engagement between scientific and religious communities on science, technology, and society.*

## GET IN TOUCH

202-326-6552

[doser@aaas.org](mailto:doser@aaas.org)

1200 New York Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20005

[aaas.org/doser](http://aaas.org/doser)

[scienceligiondialogue.org](http://scienceligiondialogue.org)

© 2023 AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE