

The Asian Reporter

Volume 28 Number 6
 March 19, 2018
 ISSN: 1094-9453

The Asian Reporter is published on the first and third Monday each month.

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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



My DNA

For years, I believed my mother. When I was a child, she said my great-grandmother Ida Mae Tutor was one-quarter Cherokee. It seemed plausible. My father's side of the family lived in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the tragic end point of the Trail of Tears, when thousands of Native Americans died during a forced march in 1838 and 1839.

I remember asking my grandmother when I was a teenager about her part-Cherokee mother and seeing her shocked face as she fervently denied any of her relatives would be "Indian." My grandparents were very racist, and my grandmother especially didn't treat her Taiwanese daughter-in-law with anything kinder than judgemental tolerance. My grandmother's denial was so emphatic, so emotional, I thought for certain it must have been the truth, one seated deeply in shame about our family history.

It was a point of pride for me that I could in some small way be part Cherokee. Many years later, I was drawn to finding out if the golden nugget of family lore was indeed true.

As a biracial Asian American who grew up in mostly white Oregon, I also wanted to prove myself to all the people who denied my Asian-ness. A while back, I completed a DNA test through the National Geographic Genographic Project. The results didn't tell me much, though, except that 10,000 years ago my ancestors split off from Africa and turned more right toward Asia than left to Europe.

Two months ago, I took the AncestryDNA test at ancestry.com. It was more detailed — and surprising. It turns out my mother lied to me. But that wasn't the most surprising part of the test. I suspect my mom, who had much friction with my grandmother, wanted to tease her by telling me she was part Cherokee. Perhaps she wanted to obliterate my grandmother's belief in the "purity" of her whiteness. Whatever her reasoning, my family mythology has been forever altered. I have no Native-American roots.

However, contrary to what many people think when they see my face, I am more Asian than white. My ethnic origins are 44 percent from Asia East, 31 percent Great Britain, eight percent western Europe, and — what surprised me most — four

percent from Polynesia. I'm actually AAPI, not just AA! Smaller percentages of my DNA are from Scandinavia, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Eastern Europe. But I also have ancestry from Central and South Asia as well as the Iberian Peninsula. My DNA map includes areas around the world. The results also showed that the white side of my family

line settled in Mississippi and Louisiana as well as the South in general.

So what does this all mean? I've lived in Oregon since I was 10 years old. Being interrogated about my entire family line whenever I mentioned to strangers that I'm biracial became my norm. I've had people, both white and Asian, deny my ethnicity on the spot, right to my face. As a creative defense mechanism to the microaggression and frank rudeness of some people, I wrote and produced documentaries and essays about being a "Secret Asian Woman." It's taken decades to not just embrace my own ethnicity, but to be vocal about it and defy people's expectations of their perception of what Asian American means to them.

With the results from the test, I now have proof that I really am more Asian (and Pacific Islander) than white. I feel a measure of vindication. It's almost like I received my "race card" of approval, and all the doubters and naysayers can just open their minds a little more to embrace what it means to be AAPI.

There are many DNA tests available out there. I chose AncestryDNA because they offered a discount. (How Asian is that!?) Another website, 23andMe.com, costs a little more but might possibly reveal more detailed information for AAPIs.

Generally I was pleased with the test results, but I believe AncestryDNA provided vague results for the AAPI part of me. While the breakdown for the European side is very detailed, "Asia East" can encompass Russia, China, North Korea, South Korea, Mongolia, Myanmar (Burma), Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Singapore, Brunei, and Palau. That's much too general, in my opinion. But as more AAPIs participate in these DNA tests, the sample pool will enlarge and hopefully results will become more specific. I still feel validated in many ways, and I'm happy I checked into my ancestry.



Pictured is a screenshot image of an AncestryDNA report generated for Dmae Roberts.