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François C. Romijn

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## Negotiating Belgian identity in Wisconsin through ancestry genomics

François C. Romijn  <sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS), Brussels, Belgium; <sup>b</sup>Laboratoire d'anthropologie des mondes contemporains (LAMC), Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

### ABSTRACT

How do Wisconsin-based descendants of Belgian immigrants – living in a mid-western, largely white, and mostly rural community – connect a perceived common Belgian ancestry to a contemporary sense of belonging through genomic ancestry testing (GAT)? Members of this community negotiate GAT's results in relation to their prior self-identification with Belgian ancestry and present-identity claims, highlighting two important findings. First, in this community, prior self-identification with both Belgian ancestry and present-day identity are important for understanding how group members negotiate GAT's results. GAT results have meaning for group members as long as they can be interpreted in a way that re-establishes the histories of connectedness and social life experiences that underpin a specifically 'Belgian' identity. Second, another feature of more interest for STS researchers is that there are no specific genomic markers clearly linking individuals to a 'Belgian' ancestry. The lack of genomic markers for Belgian ancestry ends up enabling a socially flexible interpretation of results. Indirectly and with inventiveness, community members establish their Belgian ancestry through the genomic results, despite the absence of a 'Belgian' category derivable from the tests. As such, there is significant flexibility in the way that genomic ancestry testing ends up filtering into everyday practices.

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## Introduction

Biogeographical genomic ancestry testing (GAT) is amongst the most popular practices in the field of genomics, whereby individuals ensure continuity – in terms of the construction of their identity – with others/themselves when confronted to specialist information related to their biology. GAT has proliferated exponentially over the past two decades and has become one of the 'most common direct contact that most people have to the "genomics revolution"'

**CONTACT** François Romijn  fraromijn@gmail.com  Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS), CP124 - Avenue Jeanne, Brussels, Belgium; Laboratoire d'anthropologie des mondes contemporains (LAMC), Université Libre de Bruxelles, 44 bte CP124 - 1050 Brussels, Belgium

(Panofsky and Donovan, 2019, p. 656). GAT can be defined as ‘assaying variations in an individual’s DNA, using a statistical algorithm to compare these to reference databases of samples from diverse populations around the world, and then to make inferences about the individual’s ancestry based on specific links between them.’ (Panofsky and Donovan, 2019). This genomics of ancestry is generated and promoted through singular lenses that engage the past. ‘Genetic analysis is one among a range of tools and sources currently used to piece together narratives about the past, and it is a powerful one, thanks to the quantity and resolution of the data it can yield.’ (Abel and Shroeder, 2020, p. 204). In this perspective, GAT reconfigures consumer’s sense of self, both projectively, in terms of interpretations of ancestry, kinship, origins, but also retroactively, i.e. in terms of constructions of personal and collective pasts based in, or modified by, genomic data.

Based on a novel case-study on Wisconsin-based descendants of Belgian immigrants, this article asks how members of this largely white and rural community negotiate GAT’s results in relation with their prior self-identification with Belgian ancestry and present-identity claims. From the 1850s until the late nineteenth century, thousands of Belgians immigrated to the Northeastern counties of Wisconsin. Today, their descendants constitute a notable proportion of the population in the Green Bay area. Many members of this community are active today in the exploration of their Belgian heritage and history. This case-study provides an opportunity to examine how GAT is practiced and how the results are negotiated inside a group in which long-lasting community affiliations and a common Belgian ancestry are formed. Research on the subject is limited when it comes to the study of an ethnic group where networks of inter-knowledge and a common ancestry are established. With the choice of this case-study, the main objective was to reinsert the understanding of how people relate to ancestry genomics within a still recently cohesive community made of a shared history (Blanchard *et al.*, 2017). This community has for a long time cultivated its Belgian cultural identity and today’s members tend to be secure in their Belgian ancestry and identity. This feeling of being ‘Belgian’ still gives form to the community to this day.

The broader contribution to STS research on the topic of commercially available genetic tests and their influence on ancestry claims is twofold. Firstly, the relevance of this study lies in the fact it explores how the members of a relatively cohesive group, secure in their common ancestry, relate to the practice of GAT. STS studies have seldom addressed situations in which GAT served as support for ancestry claims when this ancestry was well known by its members and socially validated. Secondly and in contrast, research has focused on GAT as a means to restore otherwise inaccessible ethnic links, as, for examples, links erased by slavery in the case of African-Americans (e.g. Nelson, 2008; Abel and Schroeder, 2020), or when connecting users with imagined ethnic links, as found for persons identifying with Viking ancestry (Scully *et al.*, 2013;

Strand and Källén, 2021). With this Belgian-American case-study, one objective was to examine how a socially-validated ancestry claim can be challenged and negotiated in relation to GAT. In addition, this case-study provides another interesting feature regarding STS research. The opportunity to specify what the ‘Belgian’ category might mean to my target group in relation to genomic signatures, when ‘Belgian descent’ significantly overlaps with, e.g. German, Dutch, or French ones will be of particular value. In other words, how does the study group relate to their Belgian identity when there is no specific genomic marker allowing a clear identification to such ancestry?

In this article, I will argue that the relationship with the Belgian ancestry and present-day self-identification to Belgian identity woven prior to the test is an important element to understand how group members perceive ancestry genomics and negotiate GAT results. In the first section, I look at specific parts of the scholarship on ancestry genomics to further highlight how research on ancestry claims connects with GAT and how it has been conducted. In the second section, I describe my research protocol and methods. The third section is devoted to the discussion of collected data. As a first important step, the discussion starts with salient features of the relationship with Belgian identity in the studied community. I place special emphasis on the interest of the community for its Belgian heritage, genealogy and family ties as well as the meaning that belonging to the Belgian ethnic group holds for its members. Subsequently, I show how these concerns connect with the cultural dynamics wherein the members of this group make sense of GAT – whether or not they are using it: notably, the display of a certainty of being Belgian in both users and non-users, the search for a confirmation of one’s biological belonging to the Belgian community, and the formulation of lay-theories for invalidating any disqualification of one’s Belgian ancestry. I will also discuss how the results, or understanding of the test results, may challenge one’s Belgian ancestry in a social interaction as well as in narratives around Belgium being the origin of a mythological journey.

### **Ancestry claims and genomic ancestry testing in a cohesive community: the Wisconsin-based descendants of Belgian immigrants**

In the social sciences, research on practices located at the intersection of genomics and ancestry claims, started in the 1990s. One of the most scrutinized issues in the STS pertains to the use of population categories in many fields related to genomics (e.g. genomic medicine, genetics of populations, public health prevention practices) that circulate an essentialist understanding of identities (El-Haj, 2007; Fullwiley, 2008; Fujimura and Rajagopalan, 2020). In line with this perspective, in an initial phase the social science research on GAT has primarily focused on the risks of essentialism stemming from a wrong interpretation of the test results and population categories circulated (Walajahi

*et al.*, 2019). GAT results can have ‘profound implications on the popular understanding of notions such as ethnicity, race, origin, belonging that pervade late-modern societies’ (Watt and Kowal, 2019, p. 43). ‘The question has arisen whether such tests reify notions of ethnicity and race as a biological reality’ (Strand and Källèn, 2021, p. 523). Be that as it may, research carried out during the last 15 years points to the same finding: it is uncommon that using GAT causes individuals to radically reshape their narrative identity (Abel and Schroeder, 2020).

More specifically, the literature highlights that in most cases it is rather difficult to establish that DNA results would only ‘lead to a reification of identity, or the geneticization of the social to the exclusion of all else’ (Scully *et al.*, 2016, p.178). In 2008 already, Nelson showed that people interpret GAT results through a variety of mechanisms – making the case that their identity does not become ‘geneticized’ in any linear or simple fashion. Following her, Strand and Källèn (2021, p. 524) suggested that ‘the construction of identity through GAT is a complex process of negotiation and interpretation which draws both on a constructivist and a primordialist understanding of identity.’ In a similar way, Abel and Schroeder (2020, p. 206) argue that the research must transcend this binary debate and

go beyond the social constructivist stance that identity is a cultural phenomenon and therefore has nothing to do with genetics, and instead must engage seriously with the idea that certain forms of identity are shaped by biocultural processes and can therefore be analyzed fruitfully using a combination of biological and social anthropological approaches.

Following a growing number of studies on how users make sense of GAT, this article aims to contribute to recent efforts to move past and refine the debate concerning whether genetic ancestry testing results in a form of genetic essentialism and to further explore the narratives and dynamics at play when ancestry claims, memory, and genomics intersect and impact present identities. These narratives are not solely the result of scientists or companies providing genomic ancestry testing, nor merely a question of ethnic, racial or national categories. As observed by Sommer (2010), ‘we have only just begun to understand the complex processes at work when DNA technologies enter into cultures of remembrance’ (cited by Egorova, 2013, p. 293). The interpretation of GAT, as any other scientific knowledge, is always located and influenced by social, cultural, and historical contexts, which shape the processes at play.

In the United-States, the practice of ancestry genomics testing is pervasive and has been increasingly commented since the mid-2000. Initially, the research based on qualitative approaches has been primarily focused on US users and carried out by US scholars. Sometimes considered as an epochal perspective that would play out globally in similar terms (M’charek *et al.*, 2014;

Beaudevin and Pordié, 2016), the US-centered lens on ancestry genomics has been little studied as such. More recently, a growing number of research has focused on GAT outside the United-States: for instance Scully *et al.* (2013, 2016) in England, Sommer (2012) in Switzerland, Strand & Källén in Scandinavia (2021) or Watt and Kowal (2019) partly in Australia.

More importantly, this practice has been little studied through in-depth ethnographic methods in the case of ethnic groups where networks of inter-knowledge and a common ancestry are already established. Nash's (2017, 2015), Nelson's (2008) and others' remarkable work on GAT notwithstanding, we still lack robust ethnographic understanding of what implications the developing cultural role of genomic ancestry testing has in both relatively cohesive communities and in broader society. With the choice of such a case-study, the aim was to situate and understand the practice of GAT in a community-specific context made of a shared history and 'long-standing ancestral identities and community affiliations.' (Blanchard *et al.*, 2017, p. 172) This aspect has been promoted as a key element for bringing novelty to the on the ground exploration of GAT (non-)practice.

The characteristics of this case-study form the novelty of this study within the existing literature. The Belgian community under study has for a long time cultivated a cohesive Belgian cultural identity. While other national groups from Europe have over generations "mixed" with people of different immigrant backgrounds and forged new racial and ethnic identities' (Horowitz *et al.*, 2019, p. 5), the situation of the discussed Belgian community presents distinctive features. According to Tinkler (2019, p. 12), Belgians in northeastern Wisconsin retained, for up to 6–7 generations 'a strong feeling of group identity,' as illustrated by the persistence of the Walloon language today, still spoken by some of the senior members of the community, and the ongoing efforts in organizing Walloon classes in the community. The borders and content of this ethnic group have certainly been redefined over time (Barth, 1969) and aside from social activities still practiced and associated to this group, the acute knowledge and living memory of its common Belgian ancestry alone continue to perpetuate a sense of belonging to this ethnic group. Unlike other studies where the practice of GAT is conceived 'as a potential to change how Americans use ethnic symbols' (Carlson, 2020, p. 827), particularly where people had no 'access to "paper-trail" information on their ancestors' origins,' the relationship woven with Belgian ethnicity in this community often appears far from merely symbolic (Gans, 1979). With direct access to material elements proving the Belgian origins of its members, and a vivid memory of how cohesive the group was in a recent past, it is an ethnic group in its full 'Barthian' sense (Barth, 1969), as exemplified by the fact that the members of this group continue today to process their identity through dynamics of ascription opposing 'us' and 'them' (the non-Belgians).

Another recent study can be taken as way of comparison and to further emphasize the distinctive feature of this case-study. Unlike the semantic elasticity carried by the category ‘Viking,’ which conveniently carries varying meanings and desires (Strand and Källén, 2021, p. 527), without tangible present-day representants (Scully *et al.* (2013)), the category ‘Belgian’ in this community intersects with ongoing social events, interactions, lived experience, and family lore. In this case-study, there is a current representative of the group (members often refer to senior members of the community still speaking Walloon) and first of all a vivid communicative memory ‘which is “living” or “embodied” memory, embedded in informal traditions, and shared across interacting generations (typically 3–4, or around 80–100 years)’ (Scully *et al.*, 2013, p. 923).

Another specificity of this case-study brings us to the types of biosocialities (Rabinow, 1996), the entanglement of nature and the social, at play in this once close-knit community where two people identifying with a Belgian ancestry in the region have a high prevalence for finding common relatives since a significant number of Belgian ancestors intermarried from 1850s until 1950s. GAT’s users in the community sometimes discover that they are biologically connected to people they know or have met before, and that they recognize from the GAT company’s online platform. This raises new ethical, sociological, and anthropological questions (see Romijn, 2022 on this aspect). The case-study also differs from other qualitative studies on the practice of GAT in considering that Northeastern rural Wisconsin is mainly populated with white Americans. Besides the aforementioned noteworthy studies, research in this field has mainly addressed this practice in the context of racialized communities (e.g. Tallbear, 2013; Blanchard *et al.*, 2017; Shim *et al.*, 2018; Watt and Kowal, 2019; Abel and Schroeder, 2020).

### **Setting the stage: methods and access to the community studied**

Genealogy is said to be one of the most popular hobbies in the United-States (Weil, 2013), where beliefs in genetic inheritance influence people’s lives in various state of existence (Finkler, 2005). Interestingly, it is especially true with Wisconsin-based descendants of Belgian immigrants. From the 1850s until the late nineteenth century, thousands of Belgians (primarily of Walloon ethnicity) immigrated to Northeastern Wisconsin, where, by 1860, they reached a population estimated at 15,000 (Tinkler, 2019). Migration occurred essentially for economic reasons such as loss of crops through disease, increasing fragmentation of agricultural land in Belgium, and the promise of receiving abundant land in Wisconsin (Lempereur, 2008). Today, the descendants of these immigrants still constitute a notable proportion of the population around the Green Bay area (Door, Brown & Kewaunee Counties specifically). Beyond the reasons exposed in the previous sections, this ‘Belgian



community’ (the term used colloquially) has been chosen by the researcher for various reasons: (i) there is little socio-anthropological studies focused on the category ‘Belgian’; (ii) This case-study had not been examined by a social scientist; (iii) To my knowledge, there is no other cases of Belgian immigration with a long-term preservation of an ethnic affiliation to the Belgian category in the United-States. At the time I was writing the grant proposal leading to this fieldwork, I thought I was potentially overestimating – not being able to substantiate my claim *a priori* – the relevance of the regions’ Belgian cultural legacy. I was unprepared for – and astounded by – the magnitude at which local communities engaged with their Belgian heritage. Many members inside this community have a profound interest in their ancestry and the history of Belgian settlement in the region [Figure 1](#).

Through the Belgian Heritage Center<sup>1</sup> (BHC; hosted in the former St. Mary of the Snows church based in the township of Namur, Wisconsin), I benefited from a first access to this community. Being a national of Belgium myself, my access to this community has probably been facilitated. My personal identification to the ‘Belgian’ category has allowed to break down some barriers pertaining to the curious questions I usually asked my participants. The disadvantage in turn was that I was generally perceived through the prism of being ‘Belgian’ (of another kind) and my own perception on how the United States is perceived in Belgium was regularly sought. As remarkably illustrated by De Andrade (2000), racial and ethnic identities are ‘constructed and becomes a central dynamic in the research process.’ In this perspective, sharing a ‘Belgian’ identity and being a non-member of this community impacted how members of this group defined their ethnic identity [Figure 2](#).<sup>2</sup>

Ahead of the first collection of data, contacts were initiated, and an ongoing dialogue was established with BHC’s administrators who facilitated access to



**Figure 1.** Front yard of a house owned by a Belgian couple, outskirts of Green Bay. Credit: photo by author, Summer 2020.





**Figure 2.** Monument at the front of the Belgian Heritage Center, Namur, Wisconsin. Photo by author, Summer 2020.

the members of this community. Following these initial contacts, I attended organizational meetings at the BHC, and events organized during summer and fall 2020. In this context, I had opportunities to meet numerous members of the community. From August until November 2020, ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews with 37 participants (1h30 to 3 h long), and 3 focus groups were carried out. Participants were aged between 23 and 87, and all are Wisconsin-based descendants of Belgian Immigrants who self-identify with a Belgian ancestry. All but 3 of the 45 participants are currently living in one of the three counties of the Green Bay area (Door, Brown, Kewaunee). 15 among them are members and/or actively involved in the Belgian Heritage Center. 22 are women and 23 are men. The interviews and focus groups took place at the BHC (either inside or in the vicinity), in people's home or backyards, one took place in a pub, and another two at a diner. 7 were carried out online. This ongoing data collection allowed me to immerse myself in activities organized by the community. I reached out with the help of individuals involved, both the most active members of the BHC and gradually with more distant members of the Belgian community, for which this sense of belonging was experienced more individually than collectively.

The participants in the study were targeted because they self-identify as 'Belgian.' The study broadly focused on descendants of Belgian immigrants and their current representations and practices related to their Belgian ancestry and current identity. The (non)-practice of GAT is studied within this wider framework, as a way to explore the relation to Belgian identity (including Walloon language courses, genealogical research without genomics, social networks, history books, testimonies). In most cases, I was unaware at the beginning of the interviews whether the participant had used an ancestry genomic test. Downplaying my interest in GAT provided methodological advantages.

In particular, this allowed me to reach participants accepting to discuss their relationship to the Belgian identity and practices related to it. These same participants may have declined an interview specifically focused on GAT. In addition, this approach would limit risks of biases since interviews were not primarily oriented toward GAT, the use of which was eventually covered, often directly by participants.

My analysis is based on a close reading of observational accounts and semi-structured interviews. I focus on actors' point of view of their own action of (non)practicing genetic knowledge. My pragmatic perspective requires ethnographic methods, bringing me close to actors' experiences, while sensitive to induction as a privileged way of producing scientific knowledge. My methods involve specifying the discursive operations by which individuals make sense of this knowledge on a two-pronged approach: (i) the disclosed content (e.g. risks/opportunities to reinforce identity issues) and (ii) the given special nature of ancestry genomics information (GAT results are *per se* an articulation between individuation, deindividuation, biological determinism, and probabilism). The data presented in this paper was selected on the basis that it appeared to the researcher to be particularly representative of the role GAT played in the community. All data have been de-identified, and the names of the participants changed.

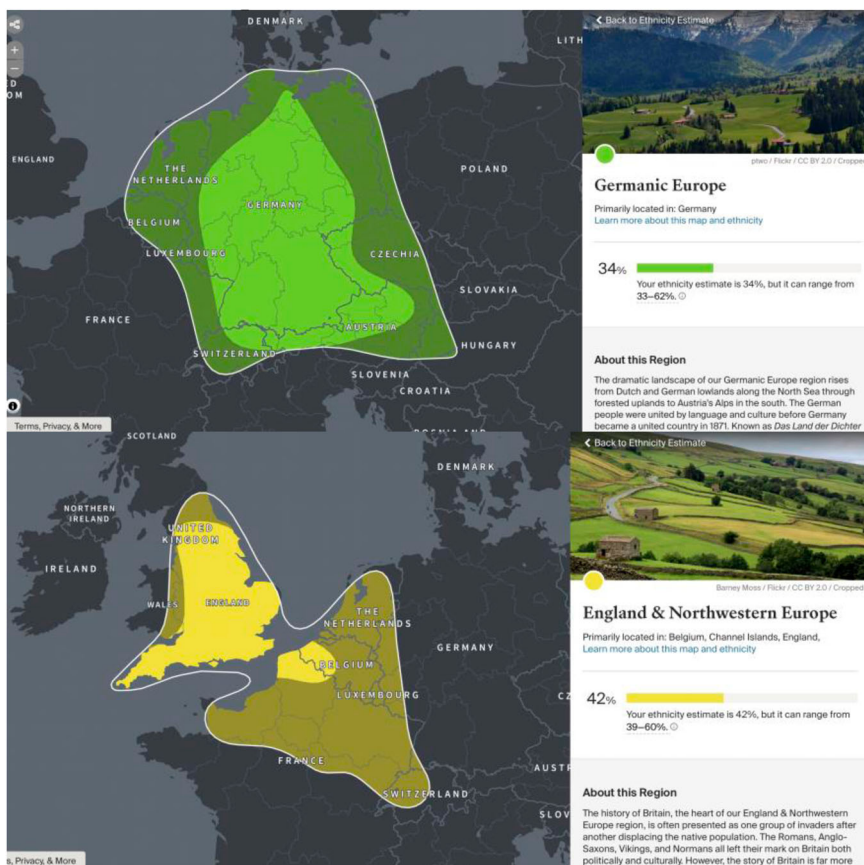
In most cases, participants did not mention purchasing one particular type of DNA test other than the most common option provided by companies, such as Ancestry.com and 23andMe, that is a SNP autosomal test (Stankus, 2020, p. 233). As illustrated below (see [figure 3](#)), at the time when the data was collected, the population category 'Belgian/Belgium' was not listed as an isolated category in the results provided by the aforementioned companies.<sup>3</sup> The term was listed within two larger population categories and the associated infographic illustrations: the category 'Germanic Europe' and the category 'England and Northwestern Europe' [Figure 3](#).

## **Practicing ancestry genomics as filtered through self-identification to Belgian ancestry and current identity**

### ***Belonging to the Belgian community: claiming rarity and displaying pride and intimacy***

Before exploring how participants address ancestry genomic testing, it is important to further examine how members of the community in this region relate to Belgian heritage.

Belonging to the Belgian ethnic group, or the sense of being personally connected to Belgian ancestry is not something one usually discovers over the course of one's life, after carrying out genealogical research for example. 'In this area, you were always aware of your Belgianness.' As Tracey puts it, one



**Figure 3.** DNA reports showing the population categories ‘Germanic Europe’ and ‘England & Northwestern Europe.’ Notes: The territory of Belgium and the category ‘Belgium’ appear only in this larger framework; source: <https://www.ancestry.com>.

is part of the group, willingly or not: ‘I mean everybody knows who everybody else is. You couldn’t get away with it [even] if you tried (laughs).’ Although Northeastern Wisconsin is diverse in terms of the origins of European migrants who settled there in the nineteenth century, the inhabitants would be perfectly aware who is of Belgian origin and who is not. Belgian ethnic membership is usually displayed as a preference. It is especially true when it comes to people who have a multi-cultural background. As Tracey says: ‘even though I showed you my whole family tree, it’s just more interesting to me to look at the Belgian part of the family because you find so many inner connections. You find the link to different communities.’

Similarly, Francis has German and Swiss origins and yet, it is to his Belgian ancestry that he most closely self-identifies to: ‘I relate more to the Belgians, because of growing more up with it and with the food, and the customs.’ Other cultural backgrounds are often left aside as being less meaningful. Francis adds that culturally and linguistically, besides being American, his

cultural background '[is] Belgian!.' This kind of orientation toward one's Belgian lineage can be expressed in various ways. Robert's father, ninety years old, constantly switching from English to Walloon, was absolutely determined to attend the interview scheduled with his son and daughter-in-law. During the discussion, he tells me with great seriousness that there are only two types of human beings in his view: 'there is a Belgian and there is a wanna-be a Belgian,' before bursting into laughs. Charles, another participant, tells me about his niece and the e-mail address she uses: 'Her e-mail address is "100%Belgian@blablabla.com."' I said, "- you are not 100%!" (laughs) and she ignored that. [She said] "-oh nice to know" or something like that.' Passionate about genealogy, he showed his niece that she is just as much from German descent as she is of Belgian ancestry. Yet it makes no difference to her.

Most members of the community are well informed on their connection with ancestral biological kin from Belgium: they claim to be '100% Belgian,' 'a full-blooded Belgian,' 'a pure Belgian,' 'a 7/8 Belgian.' This singular affiliation to Belgian identity is displayed by individuals four to seven generations removed from the migration experience of their Belgian ancestor(s). 'I am very proud of being Belgian.' When I ask Tracey how she relates to her different ethnic belongings, she says:

You know, I look at Belgianness as part of who I am. Everything else is just fact. I live in Door County. In Wisconsin. It's just where I live right. But, my Belgianness is who I am and where I come from. So, it's a deeper more meaningful thing than just a piece of information.

The intensity and privileged nature of this Belgian sense of belonging is notable. This strong attachment to Belgian identity is also associated with a narrative of rareness. Belonging to the Belgian community is conceived as a distinctive element, an exception compared to the neighboring communities, which are more often than not from Scandinavian or German descent. Connected to this logic of rarity, my interlocutors often make explicit a recurring stance among the members of the community: outsiders interested in Belgian ethnicity in the region are for the most part reoriented toward the oldest members of the community (usually those able to speak Walloon):

Tracey: Ok go ahead/ I think it's interesting what you say 'cause I think one of the points is that, traditionally, when someone comes in to study, they are interested in the past and, so, we are looking for the older members of our community. That's who the research has been interested in other cases.

The people I talk to are surprised of my interest in the current state of the group and how one self-identifies to Belgian ethnicity today. This seems to indicate to a certain extent identifying as Belgian means giving proper attention to the past. As from the first interviews, I observed a sheer interest and, in many cases, a far-reaching practice of exploring one's family history or that of the

Belgian community altogether. The relationship with the past plays an important role in the community. At the outset of my interviews, participants usually brandish one or several volumes of genealogical records or a printed version of a family tree. They tell me about the many activities that are being held in the area: presentations around testimonies on the Belgian community's past, conferences, genealogy presentations, exchange of experiences, Walloon classes, presentations sheets on one ancestor's life ... One participant tells me about the book she is writing on Belgian migration in Wisconsin. Another tells me about a couple that assembles binders of genealogical records for the members of their congregation. There is also a nostalgia amongst members who regret the transformation of the Belgian community in the last decades. Some regret not knowing their neighbors anymore, who in a recent past would have all been Belgian, or the transformations in the way kermisses<sup>4</sup> are organized today, which resembles more fundraising efforts than community gatherings focused on reinforcing ties within the community (see figures 4 and 5). Overall, the members of this group give meaning to their Belgian historical and present identity. One way to make sense of this identity includes using GAT. Contrary to Salloum *et al.*'s assertion (2018), inhabitants of this rural area are fully aware of GAT, whether or not they did one of these tests Figures 4 and 5.

### ***Confidently knowing one's Belgian ancestry and using GAT***

I met the Goosens mother and daughter on the fringes of the Catholic celebration of the Assumption on the site of the National Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help,<sup>5</sup> in Champion (Brown County). The three of us met again a few days later



**Figure 4.** Signboard announcing mid-August annual Kermis on the vicinity of the Belgian Heritage Center. Credit: Photo by author, Summer 2020.





**Figure 5.** Remarkable centuries-old tree covering tomb stones of past Namur-based Belgian inhabitants. Credit: Photo by author, Summer 2020.

for a discussion at their farmyard. The daughter answered with an emphatic ‘no’ when I asked her if she considered doing a DNA test:

08 (daughter): But to me the risk far outweighs the intrigue or the interest.

FR: What do you think they could do with your DNA?

08 (daughter): I think they are going to sell it to corporations. And I guess that my concern is /look at the state of the United States right now / depending on who is in control / depending on what powers decide to do what / can they determine if you can get health insurance because your DNA has markers for pre-cancerous things. Can they determine you might have Parkinson, so they deny you things? To me the possibilities are endless. With AI is there all sorts of other crazy things they could do with your DNA. That’s why I don’t want anybody know anything (laughs) besides me.

Apart from this illustration, this formal consideration for not using GAT is scarcely raised. The main reason evoked is the lack of interest. People consider knowing who they are: ‘I know who I am.’ This is the case with Robert. Although his son offered him one of these tests as a Christmas gift, he never used it. He appears to perceive the test more as a factor of risks than a gift. ‘Yeah, he gave it to me, but I never used it.’ His wife teases him: ‘You might not want to do that test (laughs).’ And the father concludes, ‘you never know. Maybe (...). So many jump across the fence.’ Robert here jokingly implied that he might not be his son’s biological father after all. Within this present-day community, knowing with confidence one’s Belgian ancestry is the most often stated reason for not using GAT.

However, the vast majority of GAT users from the community usually present themselves as equally confident about their Belgian ancestry. That is the case with Mary, 81 years old, who for 50 years held a bar in one of the

main Belgian townships in the area. With a pronounced accent characteristic of Wisconsin, she tells me that her daughter found the genomic test for her. ‘I knew what it was. But I had no interest in doing that. I thought I was 100% Belgian, but I guess I am not (laughs).’ She points out her lack of interest since she: ‘knew pretty much my ancestors. I knew where they came from.’ For most users I met, the reason for doing the test goes hand in hand with the certainty of being from Belgian descent. Francis’ words capture this dynamic: ‘It’s not like some of the people on the commercials in the United States, where they say ‘I always thought I was German, but now I found I am Scottish’ or things like that. We don’t speculate. We know.’

A confidence supported by socially relevant events such as that time when Francis’ mother went to Belgium to visit the areas where her family came from. There, she met a man speaking Walloon and when he started talking ‘it was like being with her parents. She understood everything. [...]. I mean it was in the back of her head, when he talked, she knew what he was saying.’ This type of life experience is used by Francis to emphasize the existence of ‘a connection directly to Belgium,’ ‘which is more potent than Ancestry.com,’ and ‘established prior’ to the use of a test.

### ***Genomic ancestry as a way of checking Belgian ancestry and self-reassuring***

Although one’s Belgian ancestry is usually said not to raise any doubt, the use of GAT can be driven by the desire to confirm how one is connected to Belgian ancestry. For some, the evoked reason was the fact, or the assumption, that one Belgian ancestor was adopted. While the events regarding recent generations are well known, another important aspect is to check if, beyond the known recent history, the genetic endowment of the family might include other origins:

Dora: It was so common for a mother to die and then the child goes to live with a relative because the dad has to go off to work somewhere. And they are raised in this family instead of that family. So, I think that when we start assuming when we go to genealogy and we say well this was my grandmother and then my great-grandmother and my great-great-great-grandmother, maybe, but maybe years ago there was some kind of break in that system. So, I think there are a lot of possibilities for surprises.

Belgian ancestry is affirmed while also admitting the possibility of another origin. As is well known and illustrated in the previous excerpt from the interview with Dora, there is a common appeal of potentially discovering an unexpected origin (Harris *et al.*, 2014, Romijn, 2017). Denise says at the start of the interview that she and all the other members of her family did the test. She adds that sometimes these tests uncover surprises, but it was not the case with her results: ‘it was an interesting experiment to see if I identify with the right people. And it has.’ In addition to the attraction of confirming on a genetic



level the link between the members of her family, the main motive seems to be her great-great-great-grandfather's origin:

Denise: Our great-great-great-grandfather that came here in 1856, he was *the* orphan, he was the person left at the doorstep in Namur [in Belgium]. So, part of why we did this was to find out if he was from Belgium (laughs). So, I was pretty pleased with the results/ for us because our grandmother from our father's side is from Austria, so we had some German in there and then the rest was all Western Europe. So, seems reasonable to us.

Assessing the putative Belgian identity of her ancestor seems to override other motives. She wants to make sure that her family is indeed genetically associated with Belgium. In other words, she wants to know if that ancestor is in fact the receiver of a reputed 'Belgian' genetic pool. Despite the fact the test does not share any direct association with the population category 'Belgian,' the mention to 'Western Europe' seems to provide Denise with a sufficient degree of certainty to establish her ancestor's belgianness.

### ***Stacking the deck in your favor: lay-theories implicitly validating one's Belgian ancestry when the category is absent***

Charles is passionate about genealogy. He defines himself as the go-between between the past and the present for the Verstraeten family. In his late seventies, he engages every day with his research. He says he is less interested in dates than in the little details of his Belgian ancestors' lives who migrated to Wisconsin. A few minutes after our discussion started, Charles suddenly gets up, opens with conviction one drawer of a massive 1.5.-meter-high cold war style metal made drawer unit. He is looking for a binder in which he neatly assembled a printed copy of different genomic test results. He did two different genomic tests (both autosomal tests, from two different companies). Describing himself as '7/8 Belgian,' he gives a real importance to making sense of the percentages received from his DNA tests that do not match this conception:

Charles: Prior to the test, I believe I was 1/8 Flemish. My father's father. 1/8 German. My mother's mother's mother (laughs). And the rest was Walloon, so I understood. I ended up taking both tests. But first, Ancestry DNA and the results showed me pretty much what I thought but then, there was, other things that surprised me [he searches the documents]. This was in 2017, it showed that I was European West 60%, which is German/ Belgian [he jumps from one to the other in an instant]. There was only 60%. And Iberian, 17%. Iberian would have been the Spanish and you know I checked back with some of my cousins' descent in Belgium but it didn't really / yeah it was the Spain controlled Belgium for a period of time. 8% Irish. Where that came from?

The '17% Iberian Peninsula' are swiftly reasoned in relation with the fact that Spain ruled the region of Belgium from 1556 to 1714. Charles seems to assume that at the time Belgium was not Belgium, yet there may have one

ancestor from Spain, present on the Belgian territory, who would have had a child with another ancestor, this one originating from the Belgian region. 'It could have been a Belgian lady that got impregnated by a Spanish person / you know.' Charles directly interprets this result by connecting it to his prior knowledge through which he sees himself 7/8 Belgian.

Regarding the '8% Irish,' the path is more meandering. He tells me he attended the concert of a couple of Belgian-Irish musicians. Between two songs, they gave some background information on their influence and inspiration. They shared their view of a strong bond between Belgian and Irish music. I try to follow this thread as it unfolds. Substantiated by the musical affinity provided by the musicians, Charles assumes a common origin between Irish and Belgian people, which allows him to make sense of the percentages associated to Ireland. Charles entangles with his test results through a singular path: he starts from the percentages associated with specific population categories, jumps to a cultural event where a musical affinity between two regions of Europe is discussed, and ends up assuming a common ancestry between Irish and Belgian cultures. In this way, he brings meaning to his genomic results. Later, Charles points out that the reference to Ireland does not change a thing for him and he adds with a laugh that he is not more looking forward to drinking a Guinness today than he did yesterday. In a jocular way, Charles' interpretative path makes him evolve from DNA results to a stereotyped cultural affinity for an Irish beer. Similar dynamics have been discussed by Scodari (2018). In any case, the results and lay-theory do not exempt Charles from checking this Irish scenario based on his binders of genealogical research, with no success at this stage.

In Francis' results, there is no direct identification to the category 'Belgian' either. The two main population categories presented – 'Germanic Europe' and 'England and Western Europe' – are however associated with infographic illustrations that both comprise Belgium (see the section on methods).

So, in some ways, I look at it, they say "England and Northwestern Europe" but, it's Belgium. So, it confirms. There is "Germanic Europe" and if you see, it also includes Belgium. So, England includes Belgium, Germany includes Belgium (laughs). So, it doesn't tell me anything really that contradicts what I already know.

This is how Francis substantiates his Belgian ancestry based on GAT results, while strictly speaking his DNA results are not explicitly associated with the category 'Belgium.'

Tammy, sixty something years old, tells me she has always been aware of her Belgian ancestry. 'I know who I am but let's just do this anyway. Let's prove it. And we will have the facts.' The results she received made her revise this pre-existing knowledge. She calls into question what she knew about her Belgian ancestry on her paternal side since only '31%' of her genomic make-up would connect her to Belgium. In other words, she expected '50%' of her

results to be connected (or rather putatively associated) with Belgium, since all the paternal side of the family is said to be from Belgium. This expectation is based on an erroneous understanding of both the ways genetic stock can be transmitted from one generation to the next and the probabilistic method with which these companies build the results communicated to their customers. If '50%' does not appear, this is, she assumes, because someone from another background has been adopted by her Belgian ancestors. This scenario leads her to contemplate the possible 'nationality' of this presumed adopted ancestor and, at the same time, to celebrate the hospitality of her Belgian ancestors and multiculturalism altogether:

Tammy: It just made me open my heart more to how many other families, also had a mixture, or maybe adopted somebody's grandson or somebody's else nephew, or somebody who lacked parents. Did they take them to their house? And just made them family. And to me, the love that comes from that side of the family because they were so welcoming. That's how I accepted it. This was something beautiful that was happening in my family.

Through this singular temporal path, Tammy makes sense of her unexpected results while reinforcing an intimate conviction that ensures continuity with herself. Even though her genomic make-up does not display the connection with Belgium, which she expected, this lesser 'Belgianness' on the genomic side nevertheless means that her Belgian ancestors were hospitable enough to adopt a child from another background.

### ***When the understanding of the results challenges Belgian ancestry***

As shown above, lay-user interpretations swiftly dispel the absence of an obvious congruence between genomic results and prior knowledge about Belgian ancestry. For the previously mentioned participants, DNA results do not really put into question their identification to the Belgian identity. The interaction with the Lambert family (husband, wife and her brother, Cooper) constitutes an interesting case to further explore the impact of tests results when they challenge self-identification with Belgian ancestry:

11 (woman): you did that? (surprised)

11 (Cooper): I did.

FR: You did?

11 (Cooper): Yeah, I took a DNA. [...]. And the outcome, I was not happy with the outcome at all.

FR: Tell me about it. You said you weren't happy with the results. Why?

11 (Cooper): I knew my ancestry was from Brabant. Ok? So, I was expecting something like that. And the test was today, 'where is my DNA mostly found', you

understand? Where is my DNA mostly found today ... North Africa! And maybe Ireland. Ireland and North Africa. I thought ... My wife did the same thing. She comes / her DNA is today mostly found, not Vietnam but an A-sian coun-try (he insists on the four syllables). A country we don't say the name so much /

11 (woman): Thailand?

11 (Cooper): Not Thailand.

Woman: Korea?

11 (Cooper): Where do the gypsy come from?

11 (woman): Gypsies? ... Yu-go ...

11 (Cooper): yu-go-slavia.

11 (woman): Yugoslavia?

11 (Cooper): Yes, that's where/ And that's true for her/

11 (woman): She calls herself a gypsy? (laughs)

Xenophobic stereotypes and confused geographical knowledge aside, this excerpt shows how the fact that Cooper took a DNA test took his sister and her husband by surprise. This situation opens with a very impromptu discussion between the participants, despite my presence as an outsider. Right away, Cooper tells me he is not satisfied with the results. The reason is the absence of a precise identification of his Belgian ancestry. He expected the results would tell him his ancestors came originally from Brabant (a province of Belgium until 1995<sup>6</sup>). There was nothing like that in the results he received, where two regions are featured: Ireland and North Africa. He points out – making sure I understand the nuance – that this test provided him with the information ‘where my DNA is mostly found today.’ He is however not especially interested in this dimension: ‘I don't wanna know where my DNA is found today.’

When I ask him if he still found information in the test that connects him with his prior knowledge of his Belgian ancestry, he refers to his mother: ‘100% Belgian,’ who only spoke Walloon, and never had any derogatory remarks toward her fellow Belgians. It is as if he wished to return to very practical facts of his experience being raised in a family with a Belgian ancestry. Subsequently, Cooper reiterates several times his sense of Belgian identity. It is as though a suspicion regarding his ancestry was now hanging over the patio where we sat. On two occasions, Cooper reaffirms his ethnic belonging: ‘But still, I am Belgian. Regardless of the DNA,’ and then ‘I have not validated the test. I still have my heritage.’ The discussion between his sister, his brother-in-law and myself, causes him to affirm his identity:

11 (man): Myself, I guess I wasn't/ I guess I wasn't concerned or even thought that/

(Cooper): You did the right thing. You don't need any confirmation. You had no question about your heritage.

11 (man): Well, I /

11 (Cooper): I had none either when /

11 (man): No. We know. We look at our family tree and we see / I can trace it back to Belgium when they first came here.

As the conversation progresses, and witnessing the sensitive nature of the issue discussed, Cooper's brother-in-law and myself take care to contain the emerging tension. 'Mistakes can be made,' 'absolutely,' 'no. We know.' We feel compelled to use assertive answer elements that reduce the risk of giving the impression of questioning his identity. This is as though everybody was trying to preserve Cooper from feeling disconcerted. One can glimpse the sketch of a 'genealogical disorientation' (Nelson, 2008) in this interaction, for the only reason that the test results did not so much contradict but rather did not confirm explicitly Cooper's family narrative. One can see how the confirmation of one's valued identity depends on the gaze and recognition of others (Panofsky and Donovan, 2019).

### ***The 'good old country': Belgium as the origin of a mythological journey***

In a discussion with the Declercq family, they appear greatly confused when I mention the establishment date of the country. In their view, Belgium existed forever: 'I thought it was like forever,' subsequently adding with nostalgia, 'the old country.' Lambert's husband circulates a similar view: 'You know. Belgians have been Belgians since Christ is born you know.' Belgian ethnicity is subject to a primordialist understanding of origins. Other aspects of such a primordialist narrative are sometimes also expected in the results of GAT. This is the case when users regret the absence of an infographic showing the migratory path of Belgians who migrated to Wisconsin in the second part of the nineteenth century. Dora tells me how she feels about that when she starts comparing her results with her husband of Norwegian descent:

Dora: They show a path from this place in Norway right over to Wisconsin. And then there is another path from some ancestors that went to Australia. Apparently, those show up when they see a big migration from here to over there. And I was like, what would be a bigger migration than the Belgians from Brabant over to Wisconsin. I would think it would show up on mine to. And maybe it just hasn't yet.<sup>7</sup>

For her part, Denise highlights the misleading character of the migratory paths associated with Belgian migrants on the website of the company she bought her test from. The path from Europe to Canada, then from Montreal or Toronto to Wisconsin, was not taken by most Belgians who migrated to this region. She adds conclusively, 'because I know the real story.' Users come back to prior

knowledge on their ancestry to disqualify information from the genomic test website.

There is often less effort in searching for new information than in confirming what is already known. There is also greater interest in the recent past. Users I met seem more interested in the last two-century-window on the past – which is the period most of them already know well. It is not a remote past that seems to drive their exploration of GAT. In this regard, Dora refers to her brother's disappointment when he took one of the first available tests [Genographic DNA ancestry test] in the middle of the 2000s: 'His [test], was so broad. It showed that trail of his ancestry from Africa through the middle east and then up into Europe. [...]. So it wasn't a lot of information, I guess.' Their regret regarding the absence of a reference on GAT websites to the event that originally brought most of the Belgian community to the region, says something of the 'mythological' importance of their ancestors' journey. Although many users know they should not expect anything else than identification to large regions, it seems they cannot help but wish the presence of at least an indirect hint connecting them to Belgium.

## Conclusions

STS research has scarcely explored, particularly through ethnographic tools, how ancestry claims intersect with the practice of GAT in populations characterized by long-term interknowledge and self-identification to a common ancestry and ethnic category. This article studied how the members of a largely white mid-western and still relatively cohesive community self-identifying with a Belgian identity, perceive genomic ancestry technologies and negotiate GAT's results. The main objective was to examine how a socially validated and valued Belgian ethnicity is challenged in relation with DNA results or the sole perspective of ancestry genomics. I argued the relationship woven prior to the test with the Belgian ancestry and present-day self-identification to this category is a prominent element to figure out how a group's members perceive ancestry genomics and negotiate GAT results.

Although every member has something to say about GAT, its use is not very popular in this community. When it comes to elaborating on their Belgian identity formation, most members of this community rely on other materialities to make the case for their rather secured Belgian ancestry. A DNA test is often presented as superfluous because 'we know what we are.' Similarly to what Sommer (2012) observed in her Swiss case-study, these Belgian-Americans draw especially on personal genealogical research, historical exhibitions and enactments, personal genealogical research, books, social events, family lore, novels, family names, and connections for their Belgian identity formation. In this framework, ancestry genomics is usually perceived as a practice of minor importance. As demonstrated by recent literature, new information

about genetic ancestry has often no fundamental impact on how people process their sense of self and ethnic identity. There is an obvious continuity between personal, familial, and social life experiences, prior to the test, and the ways the results are negotiated. The results from these tests seem to have meaning only as long as they re-establish the histories of connectedness and social life experiences that shape the Belgian community. In this white and midwestern community, there is a clear convergence with the findings of Shim *et al.* (2018) and Blanchard *et al.* (2017).

The practice of GAT in white populations shows users' great flexibility when interpreting results. According to Roth and Ivemark (2018), such flexibility can be explained by the position of racial groups within power structures. GAT users regularly demonstrate an interest for atypical or unexpected population categories. This dynamic is present in the data collected. However, in this case-study, the wide flexibility of users' perspectives regarding the category 'Belgian/Belgium' is the most notable finding. The main motivation and interpretation of DNA results are to establish a connection with their Belgian ancestry. As discussed by Horowitz *et al.* (2019, p. 6), research shows that 'those most generationally-proximate to immigrants and who believe themselves to have the most homogenous ancestries will be most likely to report the greatest ancestral certainty and, in turn, the least interest in GAT.' Although this statement is not irrelevant in this case study, I observed that users of GAT present themselves as equally confident and secured in their Belgian identity as non-users do. While interpreting their DNA results, members of the community often disregard their other ancestral origins and give preference to their Belgian ancestry. GAT users select or reject the results of their test on the basis of this same preexisting affinity (Nelson, 2008). The argument of prior self-identification as an important aspect to understand how group members negotiate GAT results is an already established one (Blanchard *et al.*, 2017; Shim *et al.*, 2018).

In this respect, this case-study offers an additional feature of interest. If GAT does not in itself 'prove' an identity in any way (Véran, 2012; Abel and Schroeder, 2020), in this case, it does not even enable a formal confirmation of Belgian genomic ancestry. Belgians do not have molecular characteristics differentiating them from their many neighbors (e.g. English, Dutch, French, German). In any case, GAT companies do not provide any element establishing a formal Belgian genetic ancestry. There is no estimate directly associated to a sole category 'Belgian or Belgium.' It is only indirectly that users can establish their Belgian ancestry from the results provided by the test. The lack of marker for Belgian ancestry is especially intriguing as it essentially allows for flexibility in the interpretation of results (for example, 'Germanic Europe' or 'England and Northwestern Europe' become markers for 'Belgian'). These large encompassing population categories provide a very flexible resource for interpretation along lines confirming a specific group identity. Besides these categories, other



results are also interpreted in a way that connect the population category with Belgian ancestry. Of note, users do not lack inventiveness in bringing out this identification in the absence of such a category. Overall, I observe that both non-specific and specific results are interpreted in very specific manners, confirming the Belgian ancestry valued by users.

From this perspective, I observed that DNA results are mostly negotiated in a manner that echoes the social, cultural, and historic context of this community. Similarly to Shim *et al.* (2018) and Oikkonen (2015) findings, emotions also play an important role in how genetic ancestry is grasped. Members show a strong emotional attachment to Belgian identity, which is associated with a narrative of rareness and pride. This attachment is associated with the situation of the Belgian community in this region of Wisconsin, which is to this day perceived and transmitted as an exception.<sup>8</sup> Wisconsin is described as a patchwork of languages and origins (Purnell *et al.*, 2013), and in the region of Northeastern Wisconsin, German and Scandinavian are said to be the most frequent European origins of the inhabitants. In this context, belonging to the Belgian community is conceived as a distinctive element, an exception compared to the neighboring communities. As shown by Roth and Ivemark (2018; cited by Carlson, 2020, p. 831),

white Americans seek distinctiveness when crafting their geneticized identity, balancing a sense of belonging and individuality. The aim is to increase their identity's "exoticism" (within what will pass social appraisals) to correct for the view of whiteness as 'boring or plain'. (p. 154)

In the case of this Belgian community, the category 'Belgian' seems to already possess a form of 'exoticism' as compared to other European origins in Northeastern Wisconsin. GAT users care about finding traces of their Belgian identity, which is a source of distinction prior to doing the test. The importance of this rareness narrative also echoes the ongoing transformation of the group.

The articulation of genetics and culture does not undo the Belgian identity narrative for members of this community. On the contrary, users most of the time find a way to articulate both in order to consolidate their narratives. 'They "prove themselves" on solid substantial elements produced by whichever combined culturalizations of nature and naturalizations of culture' (Véran, 2012, p. 253). (i) DNA results are negotiated to support interpretations that corroborate their identification with the Belgian category, which appears only indirectly from the test. (ii) When DNA results cannot be interpreted in this fashion genomic ancestry is set aside. Users stress the minimal effect of GAT. Users deviate from the test results and instead refer to their family experiences, as illustrated in Cooper's case. (iii) Broadly speaking, the attachment to Belgian identity is often negotiated through historical narratives (Elliot and Brodwin, 2002; Sommer, 2012) about events in the past of the community, rather than through an interest in the biological (genetic) identity of the group. (iv) This

does not, however, preclude members of this group from giving importance to a sense of biological identity or a ‘Belgianness,’ the term used by some participants. It is apparent that for some participants using GAT was also about the formation of ‘biohistorical’ identities (Sommer, 2010). It was about proving that one ancestor was indeed the carrier of a putative Belgian biological pool. This way of relating to Belgian identity cannot however be reduced to the practice of GAT. Some non-users were keen to interpret their Belgian identity in a primordialist perspective, as illustrated by the surprise of discovering that Belgium was actually a relatively newly established country. This stands in contrast to an interpretation where an entity called Belgium would have existed forever.

Finally, this article aimed to contribute to efforts to refine the debate as to whether genetic ancestry testing leads to a form of genetic essentialism. As I just pointed out, members of this community perceive and negotiate GAT results, clearly articulating both constructivist and essentialist perspectives on identity. However, on the one hand, it can be seen that essentialist presumptions do not need genetics or biology to be already operative prior to GAT. On the other hand, the constructivist perspective can be elaborated from the DNA results which are rarely interpreted through essentialist dynamics. In this sense, DNA results are negotiated ‘as additional ethnic markers in their own right, by mapping onto existing idioms of kinship’ (Abel and Schroeder, 2020). Even when DNA results are interpreted through a logic of determinism or essentialism, this logic does not undo the primacy given to Belgian social and historical narratives. Overall, in this community, DNA is far from being the final arbiter of subjective identification to Belgian identity. The significance of ancestry genomics is rarely used as a way to prove an ancestry (which in this case is previously confirmed and materially documented) or as a support for memory (which is still vivid and made of lived experience for most members of this group). The meaning of ancestry genomics rather lies in its potentiality to reinforce a sense of belonging to Belgian identity. This sense of belonging appears to be the main issue for participants in this study, against a background of transformation in the community and new initiatives aiming to maintain the group.

## Notes

1. Since 2010, the BHC became a cultural center dedicated to the preservation and celebration of the Belgian culture in the region. At a symbolic level, it is also a very important place for the inhabitants of the village.
2. These dynamics will be examined in depth elsewhere.
3. According to Van den Eynden *et al.* (2018), the genetic pool of the current Belgian population may be considered distinct from other European population.
4. Kermesses are traditional celebrations organized in every village usually during the summer. In this region of Wisconsin, the term is closely associated with the

- Belgian presence. However, the term Kermis is used in Belgium, but also Northern France, Luxemburg, Germany and Switzerland.
5. The church and this celebration are of particular importance in the Township of Champion. Known locally as ‘the Chapel,’ the term is used with nostalgia to designate the building originally build where the Virgin Mary appeared to a young Belgian immigrant woman in 1859.
  6. This historical province of Belgium is today divided in two parts: Flemish Brabant and Walloon Brabant.
  7. Since then, one of the main GAT companies provides an infographic showing the migratory path from Belgium to Wisconsin.
  8. This was not always the case. Some participants repeatedly told me that Belgian identity and the practice of Walloon were discriminated against and had to be concealed when they were kids.

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## Notes on contributor

*François Romijn* is currently a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Belgian national fund for scientific research (F.R.S.-FNRS) and hosted at the Laboratoire d’anthropologie des mondes contemporains (LAMC, Université Libre de Bruxelles). His main line of research focuses on practices located at the meeting point of newly accessible specialist knowledge in biology (primarily ancestry genomics, environmental epigenomics and ancient DNA research) and lay-users, who appropriate this knowledge in their narratives of identity and belongings.

## ORCID

*François Romijn*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6106-1526>

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