

Ancestry.com and the Evolving Nature of Historical Information Companies

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ABSTRACT: This study of the genealogy and biotech company Ancestry analyzes the ways in which the organization has evolved over the past few years. Ancestry is difficult to categorize as a corporate entity. The company trades in servicing both “traditional” types of history (genealogical records) and, more recently, biotech-based investigation through the use of DNA sequencing. Ancestry is highly influential in the way that millions of people around the world access the past. Given this, the company’s shifts in focus are of great interest. Through considering various new elements of the way that Ancestry functions, and illustrating that this complexity is foundational to its purpose, the article suggests the company is redefining what a public historian or public historical institution might be, adding a scientific dimension to historical data and also acting to present a particular model of the past through its advertising campaigns. The article suggests that public history’s models for considering such protean organizations are in need of attention, and the complexity of such a company demonstrates new challenges and opportunities for scholars in the field.

KEY WORDS: DNA, genealogy, family history, corporation, popular history

Information, data, and technology companies have a profound and complex effect on the way in which we live and remember.¹ The expansion of online access has led to the rapid development and growth of organizations that curate the ways in which we interact and engage with each other. Some of these data companies offer customers an interactive engagement with the past.² They present customers with knowledge, allow users to circulate information, enable clients to perform, record, and archive themselves and their pasts. Relatively underinvestigated as producers of historical knowledge, these organizations are increasingly making interventions into the ways in which we understand the terms “public” and “history.” As more information is accessed via portals controlled by corporations of all kinds, public

¹ Mark Andrejevic, “The Big Data Divide,” *International Journal of Communication* 8 (2014): 1673–89.

² See Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 67–105.

history scholars need to be aware of the impact of these organizations on historical knowledge and practice.

One particularly large, influential, and evolving example of these online gatekeepers is the historical and genetic information company Ancestry. This organization, primarily known for providing access to genealogical records, enables millions of users around the world ways of engaging with the past and tools to build and navigate the vast materials on offer. It would be a mistake, though, to conceive of Ancestry.com as simply a genealogy company, providing records and data for family historians. The swift evolution of the organization between 2016 and 2018 has changed it entirely, and this article seeks to outline some of its new aspects.

The article considers Ancestry.com from a number of perspectives as a case study in order to demonstrate that it is no longer simply an umbrella site for accessing archival information but is evolving into something more complex—part independent research organization, part contributor to popular historical knowledge, part science educator. The article looks first at various aspects of Ancestry’s repositioning in the last few years and then draws some conclusions about the relationship between corporations and public historical scholarship. Online historical data companies such as Ancestry are relatively new and evolving phenomena. This article points out the range of approaches needed in order to characterize such an organization, and to recognize its multiple iterations. As an organization Ancestry.com is unique in its offer of genetics, historical record information, and supporting software; yet, clearly, there are numerous cognate companies, and increasingly this influence of the corporation not simply as participant, but as public history actor with immense agency and impact, will need to be well understood.

1. On Ancestry

Ancestry presents its family history activities as having clear purpose: “Ancestry.com also operates a suite of online family history brands . . . all designed to empower people to discover, preserve and share their family history.”³ The key word here is “empower,” as the company presents itself as primarily an organization enabling “people.” Parsing this statement further allows us to see the various strands of Ancestry’s “design” for enfranchising the user. Ancestry is an archive of information (“to discover”), a partner (“preserve”), a communicator (“share”), and also seems to suggest that it serves a role as a public historian opening up the past to all (“to empower”). As we will see, this multiplicity of iteration reflects the diverse nature of the company. The organization provides a historical resource through giving access to records and genealogical information. It acts as an historian through its tools, interpretation of information, education, and training, all of

³ “Legal Overview,” Ancestry.co.uk, <http://www.ancestry.co.uk/cs/legal/Overview>.

which ensure the curation of the past into narrative. It influences public historical discourse, through its interventions into representation of the past in its branding, marketing, and public statements.

Originally a genealogical newsletter started in the 1980s, in 1996 the tech start-up Infobases took over Ancestry's publishing and began to develop it online.⁴ Ancestry.com was set up to capitalize on new database technologies and the ways that they were driving the dot.com and online revolutions in the US. The company published information as a magazine and online, originally using CD-ROMs and floppy disks. Ancestry.com developed through 1997–99 into MyFamily.com, which was one of the fastest growing websites in history (one million users in 140 days), attracting huge venture capital from organizations such as Intel, AOL, and Compaq.⁵ Expanding throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, Ancestry.com acquired many subsidiary databases and other online assets including Rootsweb and Genealogy.com, and ran as three separate websites through the early 2000s (Myfamily.com, Ancestry.com and Familyhistory.com). The group was reformulated as "Ancestry.com" in 2009, although some of the smaller websites still exist and many are still free (Rootsweb is the oldest free online genealogy site, founded in 1993). The company was a publicly traded company (2009–12) before being bought by a private equity company for around \$2.6 billion in 2012.⁶ Current private investors are Silver Lake (a technology investment company), GIC (Singapore government's investment arm), Permira (global investment company), and Spectrum equity (an equity growth firm specializing in internet/software and information services companies).

Ancestry.com has been part of the development of digital resources since the inception of the Internet. Indeed, models for storing, circulating and accessing information that developed in the late 1980s by genealogists helped to establish the template for early versions of the website that abide today. It has gone through various investment models while still expanding and developing its product.

As a private company Ancestry.com does not have to share records or make financial information available, and hence it is difficult to draw conclusions about the corporation. However, it is important to recall that it is a profit-based business, a privately funded firm that is interested in gaining from the sale and manipulation of information. It is a corporation that sells a product, generally defined as the ability to access historical information and to arrange that information into family "trees." Further, users can combine this data with the analyses of genetic samples submitted by website users.

Ancestry.com is a global company with a massive English-language presence that includes websites in Canada, the United States, Australia, and the UK.

⁴ "Infobase Ventures Portfolio Companies," https://web.archive.org/web/20070528152733/http://www.infobaseventures.com/our_companies.html.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Dan Primack, "Silver Lake buys into Ancestry," *Fortune*, April 1, 2016, <http://fortune.com/2016/04/01/silver-lake-buys-into-ancestry-com-at-2-6-billion-valuation/>.

Additionally websites are operated in Sweden, France, Italy, Mexico, and Germany. It has 1400 employees and seven offices globally. AncestryDNA, launched in 2012, is available in thirty international contexts and currently claims seven million customers.⁷ These numbers may be small in comparison with other major tech companies such as Facebook, SnapChat, or Twitter. Yet they reveal a huge number of “amateur” historians being engaged with by an institution-corporation seeking to provide them with history as a “service.” They show a large number of people, globally, engaging with their past and having that engagement shaped by the software and resources of the corporation. As an enabler of access to history, then, the company might be the biggest in the world.⁸ It certainly has played a massive role in opening up archives, both in terms of enabling access and through funding digitization. It also enables family history societies to function by paying them to license and use information that they have generated.

It is important to consider the reach of the company and its influence on the ways in which people globally access their past. Ancestry.com deals with enormous amounts of information, supervising access to (and in many cases providing) billions of historical records from eighty countries across numerous different websites. This information includes census data; information about marriages, burials, and births; military lists, immigration information, and newspaper text. There are some ninety million family trees on the servers, with 330 million photographs uploaded by subscribers.⁹ The company enables ten petabytes of data and seventy five million searches across all of its websites daily; its app has been downloaded sixteen million times.¹⁰ It is incredibly useful and helpful to millions of people around the world in their approach to the past. Ancestry allows an entirely new way of investigating the past to occur.

Ancestry.com—and other website-driven database services like it—have enabled the “public” to circumvent professional and academic historians entirely. A clear example of this is the globally popular television series *Who Do You Think You Are?*, (*WDYTYA?*) which premiered in 2004. *WDYTYA?* is made around the world, and in most countries the series is sponsored by Ancestry.com. The series dramatizes the “search for uncovering and understanding the past.”¹¹ The participant has been enfranchised, given direct access to the past through the opening up of archives and

7 Newswire information, November 28, 2017, <http://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2017/11/28/1207093/0/en/UPDATE-AncestryDNA-Breaks-Holiday-Sales-Record-for-Black-Friday-to-Cyber-Monday-More-Than-Triples-Kits-Sold-Versus-2016.html>.

8 See Jerome de Groot, “The Genealogy Boom: Inheritance, Family History, and the Popular Historical Imagination,” in *The Impact of History? Histories at the Beginning of the 21st Century*, ed. Bertrand Taihe and Pedro Ramos Pinto (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 21–34 and “On Genealogy,” *The Public Historian* 37, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 102–27.

9 See de Groot, “The Genealogy Boom,” 21–34.

10 “About Ancestry,” Ancestry.com, <http://www.ancestry.com/corporate/about-ancestry/company-facts>.

11 See Amy Holdsworth, “*Who Do You Think You Are?*: Family History and Memory on British Television,” in *Televising History*, ed. Erin Bell and Ann Gray (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 234–47.

the development of online software to allow the mass storage of historical knowledge in the form of family trees.

As this quick sketch has demonstrated, the company has expanded through being innovative and responsive to the developments of the market. Ancestry's very protean quality has contributed to its growth into one of the biggest providers of historical information in the world. It manifests itself on television, online, in the public imagination in various ways. The remainder of the article considers how the organization is changing now, and some of the implications this has for studying it and cognate companies.

2. AncestryDNA

Due to the massive expansion of its genetic sequencing services for family history, in 2017 the subsidiary AncestryDNA became one of the biggest providers of Direct-to-Consumer Genetic Testing (DTCGT) in the world. AncestryDNA is influential in the movement towards presenting DNA testing as a way of understanding roots, ethnicity, and contemporary identity through genetics. This presents a profound shift in the type of information that Ancestry in general is presenting to its users, away from records-based investigation towards genetics. Indeed, the company added more people to its DNA database than were paying subscribers to its services (currently 2.7 million). The company has worked very hard to present DNA data as an historical source, with wide-ranging consequences.

The "leisure" DNA testing market has expanded greatly in the past ten years, with around 250 firms now offering some kind of test to consumers.¹² The expanding commercialization and marketization of DNA testing—companies offer tests to match users to wine, to make art from their DNA, even offering Valentine's day offers—signals a shift into considering genetics something outside of the medical and health sphere and very particularly related to leisure and commodity.

Through a combination of marketing and thoughtful publicity AncestryDNA is now the biggest of the DTCGT companies. Health-related testing services have "struggled to establish sustainable business models" while AncestryDNA, launched only in 2012, is now the market leader.¹³ Ancestry's DNA database stands at over fourteen million individual entries, making it the biggest commercial collection in the world. Ancestry's huge database means that it has profound influence on the way that DNA is perceived and comprehended around the world.¹⁴ The expansion here raises important issues of ethics, duty of care, genetic education, consent,

¹² A. M. Philips, "Only a Click Away—DTC Genetics for Ancestry, Health, Love . . . and More: A View of the Business and Regulatory Landscape," *Applied & Translational Genomics* 8 (2016): 16–22.

¹³ Stuart Hogarth and Paula Saukko, "A Market in the Making: The Past, Present and Future of Direct-to-Consumer Genomics," *New Genetics and Society* 36, no. 3 (2017): 204.

¹⁴ See Anna Harris, Sally Wyatt, Susan E. Kelly, "The Gift of Spit (and the Obligation to Return It)," *Information, Communication & Society* 16, no. 2 (2013): 236–57; Hogarth and Saukko, "A Market in the Making"; and the special edition "The Age of Personal Genomics," *Public Health Genomics* 13, no. 5 (2010).

selfhood. More importantly, this growth repositions Ancestry as a biotechnology company, trading in genetic information.

Part of Ancestry.com's status as a public history company is intertwined now with what Nadia Abu El-Haj calls the "genetic historical imagination."¹⁵ AncestryDNA users add genetics to heritage: "There are two parts to any family history," their marketing now suggests, linking the textual with the scientific explicitly.¹⁶ For this company, family history cannot now be divorced from DNA investigation, as they explicitly and materially link the genetic and the genealogical. The company therefore has a profound impact upon the way in which millions of nonacademic historians conceive of themselves and their relationship to the past. This intervention into how history might be perceived in public is crucial in the repositioning of the company.

Hitherto mainly health-related, DNA sequencing is increasingly related in public discussion of science to ancestry, heritage, and ethnicity. It is useful to conceive of how AncestryDNA offers something different from other medical companies, and to what extent the testing done under their aegis is considered as part of a leisure activity rather than something relating to health. The data generated seemingly does not impinge upon the individual now other than to shift their understanding of themselves in relation to the past—hence the work of the genetic data is conceived of as different. In terms of genetic education, genetic identity, and the spreading of information relating to DNA, AncestryDNA's product is different in its purpose and effect from those other companies.

The shift in focus described here in terms of why people are interested in their genetic past and present mirrors work across the field scrutinizing different and developing motivations for undertaking genetic tests.¹⁷ The shift in the ways in which DTCGT is being rebranded and developed as a commodity reflects the impact of AncestryDNA's marketing and leadership of the sector. The organization's influence is inflecting the way that DNA testing is comprehended and understood, ensuring that millions conceive of genetics as something historicized that communicates ethnic identity rather than health information.

AncestryDNA's raw numbers demonstrate an increasing interrelationship between genetic data and personal identity.¹⁸ Commercially, more consumers are prepared to take a test that places their genetics in a historical context than with those that might highlight health or medical concerns. Genealogy and family history are no longer something that can be simply researched through archives and libraries, so the activity is profoundly shifting. The opening up and development of the "leisure" genetic market is expanding. AncestryDNA is at the forefront and

¹⁵ Nadia Abu El-Haj, *The Genealogical Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 20.

¹⁶ Cross-campaign publicity for the film *Coco*, <https://www.ancestry.com/cs/pixarcoco>.

¹⁷ Susanne F. Meisel et al., "Explaining, Not Just Predicting, Drives Interest in Personal Genomics," *Genome Medicine* 7, no. 74 (2015): 1–7.

¹⁸ See Pramod K. Nayar, "Genomes, or the Book of Life Itself," *Auto/Biography Studies* 32, no. 2 (2017): 217–19.

much the largest player in this area. The company has a function as a noneducational institution in disseminating information and knowledge about DNA.¹⁹ AncestryDNA contributes to genetic awareness, and therefore has an impact as part of public health education. The public aspect of the company lies in this participation in a changing understanding of what DNA is and how it might impact upon contemporary society.

3. Ancestry as a Research Entity

This move to analyze “historical” data in new ways is shown by the company’s move into research science. Ancestry.com appointed Catherine Ball as chief scientific officer in September 2016 as a move toward a more sustained engagement with academic science:

By bringing together DNA data and the context of ties between people, places, and human events found in family trees, the AncestryDNA team will continue to study ethnic diversity, migration patterns, human evolution and the history of our species, which has the potential to influence the way we think about identity and the connections among mankind.²⁰

The link between the family trees and the DNA information held by the company is explicitly made here. The appointment of Ball heralds a shift in the company’s self-identification, as it moves towards being part of a different knowledge community. This shows the company moving to engage with its “core” data and information in highly innovative ways, the business evolving in unexpected directions. This has profound implications for what might be considered “historical” information, and how it might be read and analyzed in the future.

This shift in focus resulted in AncestryDNA publishing new research in the journal *Nature Communications*.²¹ The paper was the result of collaboration between AncestryDNA, Computational Medicine and Bioinformatics at the University of Michigan, Computational Biology at Carnegie Mellon University, and the W.E.B. Dubois Research Institute at Harvard. The paper is relatively brief but signals the first move into serious scientific research publication on the part of the company. The article contributes to discussions about the use of DNA for population and migration analysis, and considers ways of modelling DNA and genealogical information, and of understanding genetic variation “with much greater granularity than previously possible.”²² Its innovation is the “development of novel

¹⁹ Belen Hurlle et al., “What Does it Mean to be Genomically Literate?” *Genetics in Medicine* 15, no. 8 (2013): 653.

²⁰ Press release, “Ancestry Appoints Catherine Ball as Chief Scientific Officer,” September 8, 2016, <https://www.ancestry.com/corporate/newsroom/press-releases/ancestry-appoints-catherine-ball-chief-scientific-officer>.

²¹ Eunjung Han et al., “Clustering of 770,000 Genomes Reveals Post-Colonial Population Structure of North America,” *Nature Communication* 8, no. 14238 (2017): 1–12.

²² Han, “Clustering of 770,000 genomes,” 2.

scientific methodology through the use of an extremely large sample of both genetic and pedigree data.”²³ This combination is distinctive: “Ancestry is well on the way to harnessing the scientific power of its two unique data sets.”²⁴ The article looks at 770,000 genomic datasets and combines this with family tree information to draw conclusions: “we leveraged one of the largest human genetic data sets assembled to date.”²⁵

The conceptual shift is away from using the DNA data to infer about the past. Instead, the researchers use historical and genealogical information to interpret, annotate, or clarify the DNA data. This mode of investigation marries DNA data contributed by the users of the website with pedigree information (the “family trees” that the users have created). The size of the database allows for various analytical and statistical limitations to be surmounted.²⁶ The techniques being presented are a hybridizing of genetic data and statistical analysis, algorithmically modelled. This is a historical investigation being undertaken with tools that are highly sophisticated, producing conclusions that make assertions about the way that people lived in the past and why certain things occurred. There is no historiography for such investigation, no consideration of what kind of evidence and work is being produced, or what the ethical (historical, not bioethical) aspects of the project might be. It combines cutting-edge analysis (algorithmic, genetic) with evidence produced by older techniques of genealogical investigation.

The article outlines some of the ways that historical information—which Ancestry terms as “pedigree” (or family tree)—is being recast as usable data in a scientific setting. The context here is the sophisticated analysis of information, and “pedigree” information—produced through what might be termed traditional modes of enquiry—is collected through Ancestry’s online software and turned into data to be analyzed. They claim “322,683 pedigrees linked to genotyped samples in the United States alone and over twenty million total pedigree annotations [that] allow us to infer detailed historical portraits of the identified clusters.”²⁷ This number-crunching enables a complex historical picture to emerge.

One problem is reproducibility. The company’s situation as a keeper of data and a business means it cannot share information with the wider scientific community. All of the data is generated by these customers “as part of the AncestryDNA direct-to-consumer genetic test, and [they] have consented to participate in research.”²⁸ AncestryDNA updated their privacy and consent information February 8, 2017, including an “informed consent” element that allowed customers to elect to be part of the company’s research. Users of the service have begun to conceive of their

23 “Ancestry publishes new genetic research,” February 7, 2017, Ancestry.com, <https://www.ancestry.com/corporate/newsroom/press-releases/ancestry-publishes-new-genetic-research-us-population-structures-nature>.

24 “Ancestry publishes new genetic research.”

25 Han, “Clustering of 770,00 genomes,” 2.

26 See Steven Ruggles, “Big Microdata for Population Research,” *Demography* 51 (2014): 287–97.

27 Han, “Clustering of 770,00 genomes,” 9.

28 Han, “Clustering of 770,00 genomes,” 2.

data and genetic information as useable. The relationship between service and client became more dialogic. Commentators have noted how this “dual status as customers and research participants” is a problematic position.²⁹ Biotech companies have developed relationships with their customers that are dependent on new models:

the curious consumer becomes a client and a research subject. Companies using consumer samples and data to conduct research are in essence creating databases of information that can be mined and studied in the same way as biobanks and databases generated by academic institutions.³⁰

The “user” of AncestryDNA has multiple statuses in relation to the services the company provides. Users are participants, collaborators almost, but also clients, customers, and research subjects. Users have a certain agency, as the “informed consent” document seems to involve them in the process. The “informed consent” document is careful to suggest that involvement is “participation,” suggesting something active. It also greatly widens the scope of AncestryDNA’s investigation: “scientific research to help advance the study of human genetics, genealogy, anthropology and health.”³¹ The research will “help scientists better understand population history, human migration and improve human health.”³² Later there is mention of “the connection between genetics and human traits,” “understanding the genetic links to various diseases” and the possible development of “diagnostic tools and therapies to treat diseases or other conditions.”³³ Although some of this is standard for this kind of agreement it is noticeable firstly how unimportant “historical” investigation is here (or at least, it is intertwined with other concerns) and, secondly, how important “health” is.

The *Nature Communications* publication and the movement into deepening the research reach of the company demonstrates Ancestry developing what it means to be a provider and repository of historical information. This is the action of a research institution rather than a service. The company is beginning to establish a research base, whereas it had previously offered a service. It is repositioning itself in regard to its customers, redefining the relationship and introducing a more scientifically ethical robustness. It is beginning to act like a research organization, mimicking through its activities the roles of academic institutions. It is also seeking to monetize further the information that has been provided by users, combining pedigree and genetic information.

29 S. L. Tobin et al., “Customers or research participants?” *Genetics in Medicine* 14 (2012): 835.

30 Heidi C. Howard, Bartha Maria Knoppers, and Pascal Borry, “Blurring Lines,” *European Molecular Biological Organization Reports* 11 (2010): 582.

31 “AncestryDNA Informed Consent” effective date February 8, 2017, Ancestry.com, <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/dna/legal/informedConsent/v2>.

32 “AncestryDNA Informed Consent.”

33 “AncestryDNA Informed Consent.”

Furthermore, the scientific work undertaken has been allowed through the commercialization of engagement with the past (through family trees or DNA sequencing). The company has developed an attractive reputation, a strong brand, and has monetized access to the past. This work then allows it to make a “unique” contribution to scientific discourse. The article conceives of the “data” that is the company’s product—DNA information, pedigree and family tree information—as something manipulatable and readable. The article therefore contributes to a historiography that melds textual (family tree) with genomic evidence and utilizes a variety of tools (algorithmic, analytic, statistical) to provide a particular kind of reading and narrative. It is a key moment in the repositioning of the company as a technological, scientific entity in which historical knowledge becomes part of a wider research project. Ball argues that “Ancestry is just scratching the surface of scientific discoveries that can be made when combining large amounts of genomic data with detailed pedigree information.”³⁴ The potentiality of the data provided by users, combined with new techniques, radically reshapes the purpose of the company.

4. Ancestry and Popular Culture

Ancestry.com’s interventions into wider public knowledge and understanding of the past demonstrate its increased influence and spending power, its political priorities, and its enhanced profile. These moments allow the corporation to begin to influence the ways that history is thought about. It contributes to the multiple ways that the past is understood in the popular imagination. In order to focus the discussion, we will look at two particular aspects of Ancestry.com’s repositioning of itself as a contributor to debate about history. The first is a standalone advertisement, “Declaration Descendants” screened nationally on Independence Day (July 4, 2017). The second is the cross-promotion of the Disney-Pixar film *Coco* (Lee Unkrich, 2017), which was released in Mexico and the United States in late 2017 and the rest of the world in early 2018. These two campaigns show the company continuing to transcend its origins, evolving into something more global, more complex, and with a significantly wider audience and impact than hitherto.³⁵ Both advertisements show the company making assertions about ethnicity and genetic inheritance. They situate Ancestry at a nexus of research, revelation, and identity, an aspirational company working to “Unlock your past” in order to “Inspire your future.”

The one-minute film “Declaration Descendants” reenacts John Trumbull’s *Declaration of Independence* (1817–19). This iconic painting shows Thomas Jefferson and

³⁴ “Ancestry publishes new genetic research.”

³⁵ Their spend on television was \$109 million from June 2016–June 2017, an increase of 40 percent. Jack Neff, “Ancestry.com Highlights the Diversity of Descendants of Declaration signers,” *AdAge*, June 29, 2017, <http://adage.com/article/cmo-strategy/ancestry-shows-diverse-descendants-declaration-signers/309621/>.

the drafting committee presenting the Declaration to Congress in June 1776.³⁶ Trumbull's picture shows forty-two to fifty-six eventual signatories sitting in Independence Hall, Philadelphia. Currently it hangs in the Rotunda of the Capitol Building in Washington DC and has done so since 1826.³⁷ Trumbull's image has been replicated repeatedly and featured on currency and stamps. It has been on the reverse of the rare two-dollar bill since the Bicentennial year of 1976. The painting is a powerful image of American identity.

In the modern multi-dimensional, multi-embodied, multi-temporal version, Ancestry.com presents twenty-nine descendants of the original signatories of the Declaration. The press release claims "Ancestry found and brought together these individuals to recreate and modernize the iconic" painting, and notes that "The descendants are men and women from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, Filipino, Native American and Korean, among others."³⁸ This diversity of gender and ethnicity is, as some media commentators noticed, particularly "provocative" and the screening of the advertisement in the summer of 2017 seems intentionally politicized.³⁹

Ancestry.com's advertisement presents a live-action version of the image being made, with people moving into position, while the first words of the Declaration are read by a variety of voices. The phrase "and the pursuit of happiness" is spoken directly to camera and other lines spoken in unison such as "the representatives of the United States of America" include quick multiple editing between speakers to suggest multiplicity. Hence the advertisement uses various formal techniques to imply diversity of identity and voice within the original and familiar statement. Editing, music, and lighting are deployed to make the coming together of the voices and the people dramatic and seem impassioned. The film ends with the company's hook "Unlock your past. Inspire your future."

As a multiethnic performed re-enactment of a founding moment in American history, the advert utilizes similar tools of subversion to Lin-Manuel Miranda's hip-hop musical *Hamilton*. One of Miranda's innovations in *Hamilton* is to cast the founding fathers and those around them as people of color, with Alexander

36 Made by the Creative Agency Droga5 New York, "Declaration Descendants" first screened on the June 29, 2017 in the US and was shown for fourteen days. It featured during some major prime-time national shows including *60 Minutes* and *America's Got Talent*. The campaign was multi-platform, with cinema and social media aspects. The advertisement was reported in media worldwide including *The Daily Mail*, *The Independent*, and CBS. Available on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1PMt8bnz34>. The film has had 1.5 million views on YouTube to date.

37 See David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

38 Press release, "In Honor of Fourth of July, Ancestry Honors the Past and Celebrates the Future," June 29, 2017, Ancestry.com, <https://www.ancestry.com/corporate/newsroom/press-releases/honor-fourth-july-ancestry-honors-past-and-celebrates-future>.

39 Ancestry also released an advert seeming to weigh into the Brexit debate in the UK in late January 2018; see the discussion in Zoe Williams, "Brexiters Don't Mind Freedom of Movement," *The Guardian*, January 31, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/31/brexiters-dont-mind-freedom-of-movement-as-long-as-youre-rich-enough-to-pay-for-it>.

Hamilton—who, we are reminded, is an immigrant from the Caribbean—and his peers rapping and invoking black music heritage from Marvin Gaye to Grandmaster Flash and Beyoncé. The purpose here is to short-circuit representation of the past and make a point about the fundamental diversity of the nation. The show's casting and background demands that the audience think carefully about representation, racism, art, and identity in history. Ancestry.com's "Declaration Descendants" similarly has people of color standing in for the white founding fathers, presenting a critique of the construction of nationhood. A link between "Declaration Descendants" and *Hamilton* is surely not coincidental given the notoriety around the musical after it was attended by US Vice-President-elect Mike Pence eleven days after Donald Trump's victory in 2016.

The advertisement works on this potent combination of patriotism, nationalism, and an optimism regarding the future. It is clearly situated as the organization's public profile, and their Chief Marketing Officer, Vineet Mehra, argues:

Diversity isn't just something we value as Americans; it's quite literally part of who we are . . . one of the most powerful things we can do is to show how connected we really are . . . we share an inherent need to know who we are and how we're related—it can change how we view the world and how we view our future.⁴⁰

This sense of the revelatory potential of family history, and of its innate connection to human diversity, seeks to make the investigation of the past something liberating and enfranchising. It suggests Ancestry.com enables a user to rise above the pettiness of the "now," and through engagement with the past gain a new sense of selfhood. The combination of "who we are and how we're related" might have a profound impact on the participant now and in the future.

The creation of a participatory myth of product as something that makes the user happier and better is impressive, wide-ranging, and pervasive. Mehra argues that Ancestry.com's unique qualities as a company allowed it to "own" this moment: "A lot of brands try to own cultural moments . . . But I think very few can own a moment like this the way we can because our product directly connects people to these folks that actually signed the Declaration of Independence."⁴¹ The brand is that which connects now to then, and to the creation of the nation. The advertisement associates modernity with ethnic and gender multiplicity, persuasively making the case that "America" is fundamentally diverse. Yet Ancestry's idea of subverting the "founding fathers" by celebrating immigrants, women, and the descendants of slaves, still is linked to with a keen sense of paternal genealogy. The "dynasty" of Americanness is reliant upon the male Founding Fathers, and it is their

⁴⁰ Vineet Mehra, Ancestry Chief Marketing Officer, quoted in "In Honor of Fourth of July, Ancestry Honors the Past and Celebrates the Future."

⁴¹ Quoted in Kathryn Luttner, "Ancestry's first work from Droga5," *Campaign*, June 29, 2017, <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/ancestrys-first-work-droga5-makes-bold-statement-americas-diversity/1437969>.

genetic link to them that gives the descendants their status. The model of nationhood is queered and interrogated but the bedrock of it is male and white. The coherent nation itself is not necessarily questioned. 1776 is considered to be the “founding” of “America,” with indigenous Americans relatively marginal.

The advert is a re-enactment, a re-creation. In some ways it plays on the sense that genealogy is itself re-enactment, past lives somehow working to produce the individual in the present. At the same time, the presentation of the Founding Fathers in performative, historical-temporal, intersectional drag is fundamentally politicized. Yet unlike *Hamilton* these “Declaration Descendants” are not “cast” as the founding fathers; they *are*, to a certain extent, the family of America. More than *Hamilton* they demonstrate the complex racial and gender diversity of the intervening 241 years since 1776. For Ancestry.com, this is the true face of America, expressed in terms of diversity rather than similarity. Time is dramatized here as something which accelerates multiplicity and progress towards enfranchisement. This is a potent mix of nationalism, a kind of patriotic nostalgia, and affect (the advertisement is undeniably arresting), creating a powerful final image and contributing to the “selling” of the brand of Ancestry.

Re-creation of this kind works to collapse time, producing something fluid. The power of the advertisement is in this uncanny shift, the familiar image being forced aside by the black/female/brown/older bodies in three rather than two dimensions. The bodies are temporally different but connected through family relationships. The dead are added here to the image, though, linked physically through shared genetics and DNA. Whereas in much re-enactment the dead are simply ghostly echoes or referents, here they are materialized, lurking in the genetic code of those in the present. Herein is the ad’s final political assertion, as the central figure of the original—Thomas Jefferson—is replaced by Laura, a black woman descended from Philip Livingston. The figure next to her (replacing Benjamin Franklin) is Rev. W. Douglas Banks, a black descendant of Thomas Jefferson. Several (and probably all) of the children of Sally Hemings, a woman enslaved by Jefferson, are now known definitively to be his children, and the proving of this fact is the most famous use of DNA testing to confirm ancestry to date.⁴² As Christine Kenneally suggests, the genetic work in 1998 on the Jefferson descendants was foundational in proving his paternity.⁴³ Hemings’s room at Monticello, Jefferson’s plantation, is currently being excavated by archaeologists and this work was reported by NBC on July 3, 2017, the day before the screening of “Declaration Descendants.”⁴⁴ The implication here is hard to avoid—although the

42 The DNA work was done in 1998. See Eugene A. Foster and Joseph J. Ellis, “Jefferson Fathered Slave’s Last Child,” *Nature* 396 (1998): 27–28.

43 Christine Kenneally, *The Invisible History of the Human Race* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2014), 227.

44 Michael Cottman, “Historians Uncover Slave Quarters of Sally Hemings at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello,” July 3, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/thomas-jefferson-sally-hemings-living-quarters-found-n771261>.

“family” of America may be predicated upon diversity and immigration, that multiple ethnicity is oftentimes the result of violence and human bondage. The narrative of the nation is grounded in power, violence, and people that history attempted to forget—yet is forcefully reminded of in the present.

This is no longer a re-enactment but a reclamation, a politicized painting over and deconstruction of the original, clearly linked to Ancestry’s public presentation but also a keen intervention into the presentation of history. If Trumbull’s picture contributed to a nation of white, rich men, Ancestry.com’s claim is that new stories must be told. Moreover, the re-enactment effaces the original, as diverse people “enact” the originals and make them new. Shannon LaNier, one of Jefferson and Hemings descendants who appears in the film, argues that “through my family, I am part of history. Through the recreation of that historic moment, I feel like I’m making history—it shows how much our country has changed and how diverse and beautiful America’s family really is.”⁴⁵ His vocabulary is optimistic and cites the “change” from the originary “historic moment” to the present. The tense shift from “I am part of history” to “I’m making history” suggests that the “recreation” has the power to ensure he has agency. He is now participating rather than being acted upon. The “really is” at the end posits a challenge—that this is not seen—and he is keen to emphasize his connection to something that is “history.” LaNier also alludes to the change that family history knowledge might impose: “While I have known my lineage since I was young, there were others who had just received the news from Ancestry. I found that remarkable—to have your self-identity change in one moment.”⁴⁶ Ancestry is foundationally linked to this idealistic aspiration, as Meehra argued.

In this advertisement, and many others with similarly complex aspirational elements, Ancestry positions itself as tolerant, modern, and aiding the future. Genealogy becomes a way of reclaiming experience from a “history” that had attempted to erase and marginalize. Diversity and plurality become the central motifs of historical investigation. This is only one of many promotions that Ancestry has undertaken in the past two years, most seeking to situate the company as contributing to a new sense of the past.

The cross-promotion for *Coco* similarly positions Ancestry in relation to discourses of ethnic diversity and inheritance.⁴⁷ *Coco* is set in Mexico and concerns a child challenging his family history, visiting the Land of the Dead, and understanding the ways in which identity in the current moment is constructed by the past. The film dramatizes the deceased—literally—and the way in which they are

45 Quoted in Erik Oster, “Droga5 Brings Together Descendants,” *Ad Week*, June 29, 2017, <http://www.adweek.com/creativity/droga5-brings-together-descendants-of-americas-founders-for-its-first-ancestry-com-ad/>. LaNier and Jane Feldman wrote the children’s book *Jefferson’s Children: The Story of One American Family* (New York: Random House, 2001).

46 Quoted in Oster, “Droga5.”

47 The spot is on YouTube, currently viewed just over one million times, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=25&v=GleDaN3A2jg.

remembered on the Day of the Dead (*Día de Muertos*). Those who are dead must be remembered or they will disappear forever. The film was released on Thanksgiving and so here again the company intervened at a key moment in the American calendar, although reviewers noted that the film “assumes a non-American point-of-view on spirituality and culture.”⁴⁸ The Ancestry.com tie-in spot has the hero discover through a “hint in our family tree” an explanation for his love for music. The spot dramatizes the family tree, overlaying the visual framework of the company’s online software onto the animation. Ancestry.com’s association with this film, then, positions it in relation to a massive emerging market, Mexico, and American engagement with the heritage of that country.

Genealogy here is complicated with discourses of memory and commemoration, and the dead in the archive are fleshed out and given “life.” The film dramatizes the agency of the dead, and the ways in which they might change the living (and how the dead might be changed by the living, too, through the act of memory). Genealogy and family history become acts of commemoration, ways of keeping people alive, and means of changing the understanding of the self in the contemporary moment. As Thomas Laqueur argued about commemoration culture, these acts bring “dead into some sort of presence.”⁴⁹ This cross-promotion associates Ancestry with a film about the immanence of the dead, and the ways in which commemoration can give them agency. The advertisement gives Ancestry’s product renewed and new popular dimension; it gives Disney Pixar historical gravitas and weight.

Both these instances are marketing and promotional materials. How, then, to consider their influence on the popular imagination, and hence their action as public history? It is important to recognize the commercial aspects. They seek to present the company as something associated with dreaming, with aspiration, with hope, and with a kind of revelation. The advertisements do not attempt to sell the “product” of Ancestry.com. Little is mentioned of what one might actually *get* from the company. What they are creating is a narrative about Ancestry.com, a set of associations and impressions that are much more potent. The brand that is being promoted here is something interested in diversity, that enables through investigation of the past a possible new future, something transformative. The product is the brand, as the company sells an impression and a reputation. Yet the films are clearly pitching for some kind of customer engagement, and this is their contribution as public history of a kind—engagement with the past in public, editorial contribution to popular historical source. Their public historical work here is aspirational and seeks to associate historical investigation with a revelation of selfhood and a future political liberation.

⁴⁸ Matt Zoller Seitz, “Review: *Coco*,” November 12, 2017, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/coco-2017>.

⁴⁹ Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 427.

5. Corporations and Public History

Companies like Ancestry.com have rarely been studied in relation to their contribution to public historical awareness or sensibility.⁵⁰ Indeed corporations and businesses in general have not often been considered critically in the field of public history.⁵¹ The role of corporations has often been overlooked by public history scholarship; something possibly to be comprehended and advised upon rather than critiqued or conceptualized. Public history historiography has been driven by pedagogical models that privilege skills, ethics, and a “professional-based practice approach.”⁵² When they are considered, businesses and corporations are often conceived of as individual entities, often production companies with editorial purpose (such as a documentary filmmaker). Conversely the business-model aspect of, say, private and public museums is not analyzed. Public history intervenes regularly with museums, heritage, politics, education, policy, and public institutions at highly conceptual levels, but less frequently with the organizations that govern access to information or those which often offer much of the material context for public engagement with the past.

G. Wesley Johnson’s outline of public history in his “Editor’s Preface” to the first edition of *The Public Historian* in 1978 suggested that engagement with business might include analysis of “origins of corporate decisions, policy analysis, history of a corporation, study of leadership.”⁵³ Although this outline is over forty years old now, it remains the case that public history lacks a model for critical engagement with corporations, or a flexible way of “reading” their contribution to historical awareness. Conversely the disciplines of business history, organization and management studies, and critical management studies, although recently engaging with

⁵⁰ In public history historiography the role of the corporation as historical *actor* is often subservient to a consideration of the “engagement” and partnership envisaged between business and historian, as in A. E. Klausner, “A Need for Historians within Businesses,” *The Public Historian* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1978): 13–14. This collaborative-creative model is explored further by Shelley Bookspan, “Something Ventured, Many Things Gained: Reflections on being a Historian-Entrepreneur,” *The Public Historian* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 67–74. Other public history models consider the corporation’s construction of its history as the focus of study; see the Special Review Section in *The Public Historian* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 73–95 on “Corporate Presentations of History” which looks at the self-presentation of Hershey’s, Levi Strauss, and Samuel Adams Brewery. It is important here to note the continuing interrelation of public history and business history in the US.

⁵¹ See Thomas Cauvin’s outline of “historians as entrepreneurs,” *Public History: A Textbook of Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 13 and 250–72. The role of historical method and approach in organization and business studies is highly contested, see for instance Michael Rowlinson, John Hassard and Stephanie Decker, “Research Strategies for Organizational History: a Dialogue Between Historical Theory and Organizational Theory,” *Academy of Management Review* 39, no. 3 (July 2014): 250–74.

⁵² Noel J. Stowe, “Public History Curriculum: Illustrating Reflective Practice,” *The Public Historian*, 28, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 44. See also Rebecca Conard, “The Pragmatic Roots of Public History Education in the United States,” *The Public Historian* 37, no. 1 (February 2015), 105–20 and Benjamin Shambaugh and the *The Intellectual Foundations of Public History* (Des Moines: University Press of Iowa, 2002).

⁵³ G.W. J. [G. Wesley Johnson], “Editor’s Preface,” *The Public Historian* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1978): 6.

historical method and approach, often align themselves more with methodological analysis derived from social science models.⁵⁴ This presents a challenge given history's perceived predominant interest in "interpretative rather than analytical claims."⁵⁵ Business historians interested in the ethics of representation similarly lack a means or method.⁵⁶ There is at present no model for conceiving how technological companies might be simultaneously businesses, entrepreneurs, public historians, and health practitioners.⁵⁷

In his "Editor's Preface," Johnson argued for the validity and legitimacy of public history practice: "we firmly believe that this new class of professionals, the Public Historian, should be subjected to the same kind of peer review and evaluation that obtain in the academic world."⁵⁸ This assertion of the duty and ethical/intellectual/professional aspect of public history practice has been a constant part of its theory and methodology through the past forty years.⁵⁹ Historical actors in public, and those who make, construct, present, sell, argue and debate history, should be examined closely for their historiographical intervention, their bias, their purpose, and their contribution to a wider historical discourse. The interrelationship between practice and theory is key—and, indeed, historical practitioners give the theoretical backbone to the work of corporations.

It is strange, then, that when businesses and corporations engage with the past in this way they are rarely critically examined *as* public historians themselves. There is of course much work on them "in history" or as *historians* of their own narratives.⁶⁰ Yet there is little analysis or critique of the historiography, methodology, of corporations as public history entities—that is, contributing to and constructing versions of the past, influencing and impacting upon the ways in which that past might be accessed and understood.

Introducing a 1994 special issue of *The Public Historian* considering the "difference" public history might have made Charles C. Cole Jr. argued that "the enterprise of history, in whatever venue pursued, ought ideally to be considered

⁵⁴ See Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott, eds., *Critical Management Studies* (London: Sage, 2011).

⁵⁵ Stephanie Decker, Matthias Kipling, and R. Daniel Wadhvani, "New Business Histories! Plurality in Business History Research Methods," *Business History* 57, no. 1 (2015): 32.

⁵⁶ "Historical researchers face a dilemma of how to position themselves between business history, which is largely indifferent to the epistemological issues raised by the cultural turn, and organization studies which remains sceptical towards the epistemic status of historical narratives." Michael Rowlinson and John Hassard, "History and the Cultural Turn in Organization Studies," in *Organizations in Time: History, Theory, Methods*, ed. Marcelo Bucheli and R. D. Wadhvani (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 148.

⁵⁷ Daniel J. Cohen, "History and the Second Decade of the Web," *Rethinking History* 8, no. 2 (2004): 293–301.

⁵⁸ Johnson, "Editor's Preface," 9.

⁵⁹ Katharine T. Corbett and Howard S. (Dick) Miller, "A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry," *The Public Historian* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 15–38; Julian, Zelizer, "Clio's Lost Tribe: Policy History Since 1978," *Journal of Policy History* 12, no. 3 (2000): 369–94.

⁶⁰ Marianne Babal, "Sticky History: Connecting Historians with the Public," *The Public Historian* 32, no. 4 (Autumn 2010): 76–84.

one seamless enterprise, with practitioners, data, and methodologies flowing in all directions.”⁶¹ Public history theory has regularly tended to present a very clear understanding of what “history” is. Cole’s work is part of a strand of public history historiography that has tended to see the subdiscipline as something participatory, collaborative, civically minded, and enfranchising. Cole finishes his introduction:

The principal message of these papers is that although some people may disagree, the discipline of history is not the exclusive domain of the university. Its future direction is not to be determined only by academics. Public history *has* made a difference, but eventually the words “public” and “academic” will lose their importance as all historians collaborate in the search for uncovering and understanding the past.⁶²

Of course, in the intervening twenty-odd years much has changed, particularly in the relationship of the academy to the “public” in most Anglophone countries.⁶³ Public history has flowered during a period in which the “exclusive domain” of the university was stormed. It is necessary to theorize what remains, and perhaps to recognize that corporations have replaced the academy as gatekeepers and controllers of access to knowledge. Possibly not coincidentally, the period 1990–96 saw the foundation and development of the company that was to be launched as Ancestry.com in 1996. Cole’s sense that public history as a recognizable discipline would dissolve into something enfranchising—everyone would be simply an “historian”—would be realized in a way that was unimaginable into him in 1994.⁶⁴

6. Ancestry as a Public Historian

Yet this leaves us with more questions than answers. If a company participates in historical work is it a public historian? Where is the place of profit in historical endeavor? What is the agency of the consumer in “making” history? Are those people that use Ancestry’s software public historians themselves, and might we therefore theorize *their* practice within the umbrella of the company? The historical sensibilities of millions of genealogists around the world is now affected by and influenced by Ancestry.com’s resources. It is important to have an understanding of the way in which tech information companies influence historical awareness and research direction. They are changing how history is “done” but also of how history is conceived. What does analysis of this company tell us about history, data, and the public in the early years of the twenty-first century? Can

61 Charles C. Cole, Jr., “Public History: What Difference Has it Made?” *The Public Historian* 16, no. 4 (Autumn 1994): 11.

62 Cole, “Public History,” 35.

63 Andrew McGettigan, *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets, and the Future of Higher Education* (London: Pluto, 2013).

64 See de Groot, *Consuming History*, 17–36 and Cauvin, *Public History*, 1–18.

analysis of large companies like Ancestry.com further our understanding of contemporary capital and the digital economy? Can this, further, point us in directions that public history research might take in the future, driven by and within this economic context?

Ancestry.com is now a major provider of access to historical information, but it also allows its users to “build” that data into something. The website contributes to wider historical knowledge and awareness through popular historical activities (particularly advertising). Through its genetics division Ancestry.com actively works to combine textual and genomic ways of knowing the past. To a certain extent, Ancestry.com’s multiplicity demonstrates the limits of our historiography when considering corporations in “historical” contexts, as *actors*. In terms of historical knowledge Ancestry.com is actor, producer, constructor, and repository of information; archive and investigator; research base and innovator. It has multiple agencies and influences on the *practice* of history; it also *practices* history-making itself and participates in new ways of conceiving of the human in the past. The company is multiple in its iterations and it is important to understand it as such, and to evolve a mode of engaging with online corporations like this in future. Hence the approach of this article has involved consideration of Ancestry.com’s development as a business; as a public history site; as a disseminator of information; and as a knowledge institution.

Vineet Mehra argued that the events of 2017 are a “shifting” moment in the branding of the company, a shifting toward a politicized sense of possibility “we are really shifting our focus to understand your past to inspire your future . . . We really feel like there is this notion of urgency that we can drive in people.”⁶⁵ The brand narrative is the notion of historical investigation “inspiring” in the present. This company is beginning to sell the idea of futurity and urgency to customers, linking an idea of looking to the past with a sense of new possibility. The epistemology is optimism, rather than nostalgia, and the creation of something new and newly possible. This “modern” subject is constructed through an engagement with the past—phrased as an “understanding” of that past—but which establishes an historiography of hope. The organization is changing focus, developing a new profile that repositions family history in the public imagination.

No other “historical” entity or company is undertaking this kind of profile-building and brand creation. It would be difficult to think of an equivalent organization in terms of profile and reach. Ancestry.com is unique in its engagement with millions of people through their DNA and their family history. Yet it is also part of a new breed of (mainly online) companies that are acting as gatekeepers of historical knowledge and experience and working influentially to contribute to the historical imaginary. Its resources and software impact upon the historical sensibility of those who use them, but it is also shifting the narrative about what historical investigation is, what the experience of the past might be, about how

⁶⁵ Quoted in Luttner, “Ancestry’s first work.”

and where this might happen. Ancestry.com is also monetizing that experience, ensuring that access to the information of the past is profitable, and turning “historical experience” into commodity.⁶⁶ Throughout, Ancestry.com is a public history institution, a key actor in allowing people to engage with their past, particularly through a lens of science.

The article has sought to illustrate the Ancestry’s contributions as a public historian, as an historical actor, as an influencer, and as a participant in the historical imaginary. Such investigation allows us to consider how we might conceive of Ancestry’s impact and profile as an historical organization. It might be argued that these foci ignore the “central” business of the company—that is, providing genealogical information and family tree software.⁶⁷ Yet such is the nature of Ancestry that this information is simply part of the story. The company has agency as a public historian, contributing to wider public understanding of the past but working outside of many of the norms that “traditional” organizations might observe. Indeed, Ancestry.com’s motivations are evidently commercial, something which colors all of its decision-making. Unlike a museum or a library or an archive, or indeed a television company or film company, Ancestry.com is selling product and monetizing the dream of family and the emotional connection with the past through a particular type of investigation. It has a function as a public science communicator, normalizing the discourse of genetics and DNA and dampening anxiety about the impact of these data and technological shifts on the lives of millions around the world. Part of Ancestry.com’s current positioning is as a research institution, acting similarly to a higher education research organization. The company uses the data given them in a large experiment, and customer-historians become participants.

Ancestry.com is itself an institution of public history, presenting itself as a collaborator with the user. It is also a leader, providing new sources of historical knowledge and information. It is an innovator, articulating an approach for the user. Hence Ancestry.com contributes to the “future direction” of the discipline—and hence its historiographic, evidentiary, and popular historical interventions must be keenly audited. Ancestry.com presents itself as a partner, a collaborator, and seems to engage with the wider methodological discussions of what, why, and how history is important. The organization engages in wider popular debate—via advertising—about the value, ethics, and impact of historical awareness. It has, surely, public historical agency as an institution, in terms of the resource it offers and the means of approaching the past it provides.

Rebecca Conard argues that “public history can be examined as the reflective practice of history,” and Ancestry.com has influence in enabling this to happen and contributing a means for millions of users worldwide to reflect upon their

66 See Gísli Pálsson, “The Web of Kin: An Online Genealogical Machine,” in *Kinship and Beyond: The Genealogical Model Reconsidered*, ed. Sandra Bamford and James Leach (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), 84–110.

67 See Jerome de Groot, “The Genealogy Boom.”

engagement with the past.⁶⁸ It has agency in the ways in which it allows users to interface with and organize their understanding of the past, and increasingly the organization is seeming to be self-aware as a public history. It has agency as a public historian through its scientific interventions and its contribution to popular understanding of the past. As much as a museum or an archive, this corporation is a public historical institution. Recognizing this opens up an interesting area for future public history scholarship.

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68 Conard, "Public History as Reflective Practice," 11.