

Ancestry.com's Race Stories: Examining Whiteness on the Genealogy Web

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Abstract

The popularity of genealogical research is linked to the growth of online genealogy services such as Ancestry.com, which, as of 2020, has over three million paid subscribers. Another 18 million people have taken genetic ancestry tests through the company's subsidiary, AncestryDNA. This article interrogates how Ancestry presents information on race and ethnicity to users, asking if it is possible for researchers to build a critical racial identity using Ancestry's services. Applying an understanding of whiteness that comes from critical race studies, the article examines the way race, and whiteness in particular, is presented in the business's marketing, web features, and products such as AncestryDNA. These examinations reveal a company selling customers family history narratives that comport with the mythology of American egalitarianism, while at the same time essentializing race and ethnicity. The implications of these findings are significant for information professionals because Ancestry relies on partnerships with libraries and archives to supply material for the website's research database. These partnerships compel archivists and librarians to scrutinize Ancestry's information ethics. The article calls for further discussion and research into how information professionals can be agents for change in how race and ethnicity are treated in online genealogy spaces.

Keywords: archival ethics; genealogy; genetic ancestry testing; public-private partnerships; whiteness

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Introduction

American identity is often expressed in a plethora of hyphenations, for example, Irish-American, Mexican-American, and African-American. It is common for a person to ask another, "what are you?" and expect an answer told in ethnic fractions or racial categories; in my experience, "white" is hardly ever a satisfying response. In fact, Americans who completed the census online in 2020 were prompted to provide both their ethnic and racial identities. In answering this question, I grappled with how, and how much, to answer: do I specify every tiny fraction of Irish, German, and British ancestry even though I feel no meaningful connection to these ethnicities? Is "Jewish" an ethnicity? For many white Americans like me, ethnic identities have been blurred by generations of assimilation and inter-marriage, turning ethnic identity into something that is known rather than experienced or felt. This knowing often comes to us via genealogy.

Genealogy is one of the most popular hobbies in the U.S. (Rodriguez, 2014). It is also a big business: as of the spring of 2020, the genealogy website Ancestry.com had over three million paid subscribers.¹ Another 18 million customers have taken DNA tests through Ancestry's genetic

genealogy service, AncestryDNA (Ancestry.com, n.d.-a). These customers have turned to a company to help them understand *who they are*. With a subscription fee of \$25 USD a month to access Ancestry's databases, which consist of digitized documents from libraries and archives, or a one-time cost of \$99 USD for a genetic test, Ancestry will tell you the story of your past, presented in an interactive family tree or a pie chart displaying ethnic percentages. These services allow users to create new understandings of their identity, with profound implications for how they conceive of themselves in the context of their communities and society at large. Ancestry's slogan commands: "Unlock your past. Inspire your future."

White Americans make up the majority of customers for genetic genealogy tests and presumably a large percentage, if not majority, of subscribers to online genealogy services (Murphy, 2018). While the implications of genetic genealogy test-taking among white Americans has been explored by researchers (Roth & Ivemark, 2018; Panofsky & Donovan, 2019), less attention has been devoted to the overall effect of genealogical research on racial and ethnic identity construction among whites. As researchers construct family trees and chart the percentages of their ethnic make-ups, is it possible for them to build a critical racial identity? In answering this question, special attention must be paid to the way for-profit companies, whose services have contributed to genealogy's surge in popularity, present information on race and ethnicity to users. Applying an understanding of whiteness that comes from critical race studies, this article interrogates how the largest genealogy company, Ancestry, informs users' understanding of race and the identity construct of whiteness. A closer look at the business's marketing initiatives, web features, and products such as AncestryDNA, reveals a company selling customers family history narratives that comport with the mythology of American egalitarianism, while at the same time essentializing race and ethnicity. As the means by which millions of people access material held by archives and libraries, I argue that information professionals should be at the forefront of scrutinizing Ancestry and its practices.

Critical Whiteness and Genealogy

When I answer the question, "what are you?" by saying that I am white, I do so in an attempt to deconstruct the *essentialism of whiteness*, what sociologist and pioneer of Critical Whiteness Studies Ruth Frankenberg calls the "unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance" (1993, p. 6). Critical Whiteness Studies dismantles the essentialism of whiteness, revealing how this identity was historically constructed to advance a racial hierarchy that puts those who can claim its label at the top with impunity to commit violence against those who cannot. A critical perspective on whiteness also illuminates the shifting boundaries of the identity: throughout American history, whiteness has expanded from northern European protestants to include Irish Catholics in the nineteenth century, then southern Europeans and Jews in the twentieth.

The process by which Irish immigrants became white in America is charted by Noel Ignatiev (1995) in *How the Irish Became White*. Ignatiev explains that Irish immigrants in the nineteenth century earned admission to the white race by distancing themselves from abolitionism, enforcing racial exclusion in Northern workplaces, and asserting their ability to riot. In short, "...while the white skin made the Irish eligible for membership in the white race, it did not guarantee their admission; they had to *earn it*" (Ignatiev, 1995, p. 70). They earned it by becoming willing participants in racial violence against American Blacks.

This can be an inconvenient truth for many Irish Americans, whose identities are more often linked to the hardship they faced as second-class citizens in their homeland. It is not pleasant to realize that one's ancestors escaped oppression only to take up the role of oppressor in a new home. Indeed, the fabled American origin story is that of escaping racial, religious, or ethnic persecution to earn one's successes on an even playing field. Racial privilege undermines this myth. In the rhetoric of politicians and public figures, one hears the reflexive discomfort with admitting the historical truth of white privilege. U.S. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell reacted in this way to a 2019 congressional hearing on whether the body should take up reparations legislation:

I think we're always a work in progress in this country but no one currently alive was responsible for that [slavery] and I don't think we should be trying to figure out how to compensate for it...We've had waves of immigrants as well come to the country and experience dramatic discrimination of one kind or another so no, I don't think reparations are a good idea. (Barrett, 2019)

McConnell uses the American origin story of universal and equal struggle to exempt white Americans with post-slavery immigrant ancestry from white supremacy while also equating their struggles in this country with that of Black Americans. This myth finds a factual basis in genealogical research, which allows Americans to reclaim ethnic roots and immigrant ancestors. In effect, genealogy allows the white American to reverse Baldwin's equation and go back to being Norwegian when it is convenient.

Using my own white family as a test case, I demonstrate how Ancestry promotes a selective understanding of ethnicity through its decisions about which records to collect, the website's features for contextualizing and searching these records, and the marketing with which Ancestry promotes its services. I approach Ancestry's website and genetic genealogy services from a Critical Whiteness Studies perspective, supplementing my own critique with coverage of the company from the news media, and from literature in fields of anthropology, information and media studies, all fields where scholars have begun to take notice of the burgeoning popular interest in genealogy and its potential ramifications.

Ancestry's Ahistorical Whiteness

"LifeStories"

Sometime between 1920 and 1930, my great-grandfather Maurice Rabinowitz became Morris Robinson. In 1910, Maurice Rabinowitz' place of birth was recorded on the U.S. census as "Russia/Yiddish"—a Jewish immigrant from Russia. On the next census, 1920, Maurice was listed as a native New Yorker, born to Russian parents, with Yiddish nowhere to be found. These records tell the story of how my Jewish immigrant great-grandfather became White. These identity changes are not included in Morris' "LifeStory," a timeline of major events in a family member's life that is generated by Ancestry for each person in your tree. The "LifeStory" feature was rolled out by Ancestry in 2015 and uses the records about relatives to generate a narrative, complete with "Historical Insights," which "help you learn about important moments in history that your ancestors may have experienced" (Ancestry.com, 2015). According to Ancestry, my great-grandfather would have experienced the fear of typhoid outbreaks in New York City in 1907 and the Hudson-Fulton celebration in 1909. The outbreak of World War I and the onset of the Great Depression apparently do not merit inclusion.

The featured historical events are based primarily on geographic information, and there is no ability for users to add their own historical insights or even browse the available options. Without transparency as to how Ancestry constructs the LifeStory for a person, I wondered if and how race, one of the only pieces of information consistently reported on census records, impacts the narrative. Browsing the census records for my great-grandfather, I chose at random a New Yorker of similar age to Morris, but identified on the census as Black. The LifeStory for this man, Thomas Robinson (of no relation, just proximate to my relative in the search results), includes these two events: the invention of the kinetograph and the opening of Steeplechase Park in Coney Island. Thomas Robinson's mother, Ophelia, was born in 1867 in Virginia, two years after the abolition of slavery. According to Ancestry, major historical events she would have lived through included the advent of Broadway theater, and just like her son, the invention of the kinetograph. Interestingly, these are the same historical events that my great-great-grandfather Max Rabinowitz, is also said to have perhaps experienced. According to Ancestry, and based on this sampling, it seems there are five historical events that took place in New York City around the turn of the century, and none of them have to do with mass-migration, urban poverty, or racism. In this picture book version of history, genealogists find that their relatives lived through some tough times (typhoid) but mostly good ones (parades, movies, amusement parks).

The LifeStory for my third great-grandfather on the other side of my family tree, Benjamin Furman Sweet, indicates he perhaps "witnessed or experienced" political discrimination while living in Palmyra, Kansas, in 1875 after the passage of the 15th Amendment. It is highly unlikely that Benjamin, a white, protestant, native-born American, experienced discrimination of any kind during his lifetime. In fact, he perpetrated it. According to family lore, when Benjamin married his wife Jane Robinson in 1830, the bride's parents, my fourth great-grandparents, gifted them an enslaved person. Their descendents would later say that Benjamin and Jane came to regret that they had sold this enslaved person rather than freeing them from bondage. I was unable to verify any of the aspects of this story from documents available on Ancestry, but was able to verify that Jane Robinson's parents, and their parents before them, were enslavers. On his deathbed in late 1839, my fourth great-grandfather Thomas G. Robinson, willed to his wife Lucy, "the farm whereupon I now live together with all the improvements thereon also all my negroes & personal property" (Kentucky County, District and Probate Courts, 2015). While documents found on Ancestry reveal that my ancestors were enslavers, facts from these documents do not find their way onto my ancestors' LifeStory or Profile, while information on marriages, births, immigration, migration, occupations, and deaths do. This oversight, intentional or not, redacts a significant and difficult biographical fact from the stories of hundreds of thousands of enslavers found on Ancestry.

Researching Slavery

It is difficult to locate records connecting whites to slavery on Ancestry; doing so requires the researcher to intentionally seek out such documentation. One of the most valuable collections in this regard are the 1850 and 1860 United States Census Slave Schedules, which list the names of enslavers and the number of people they enslaved.² In 2019, Ancestry changed its search capabilities so that the slave schedules no longer appeared in search results—genealogists now had to navigate to the slave schedules in order to search them. As Adam H. Domby (2019) writes, this change to the search function:

means that someone searching for ancestors might discover a wealthy progenitor with no record of the foundations of that wealth, making it all too easy to claim, as many

privileged white American families do, that their individual family earned its fortunes outside of slavery despite the central role slavery had in shaping the nation's politics, economics, culture, and society.

Ancestry members have access to at least 15 other databases besides the slave schedules containing information on slave holding in the U.S. It is not obvious which of these have been indexed and are therefore included in search results. As with the slave schedules, a researcher might need to be aware that these resources exist and then search within those databases separately. And while Ancestry does provide assistance for locating and searching their collections documenting slavery, these blog posts and research guides almost exclusively assume the researcher is a descendent of the enslaved, rather than the other way around; slavery is portrayed as a relevant research topic for Black genealogists only.³ On the contrary, researching and revealing ties between white ancestors and slavery is crucial to recognizing how intergenerational wealth was built on the profits of Black bondage. And even for those post-Civil War immigrants who could play no historical role in American slavery, race had an impact on their "LifeStories" that Ancestry fails to tell.

Marketing Fairytales

Ancestry's storybook re-remembering of history is voiced in their marketing. In an article in the *New York Times* heralding Ancestry's release of prison records from New York State, a company spokesperson commented that, "Family history is a puzzle, and some pieces are more surprising or salacious than others...There's something wickedly comforting in the notion that nobody's perfect" (Roberts, 2014). Here, Ancestry is selling the potential fun in uncovering an ancestor's criminality, accurately represented in prison records found on their website. Aside from the obvious reality that discovering a family history of incarceration can be saddening, if not traumatizing, there is a false assumption that the presence of an ancestor's name in penal records indicates wrongdoing on their part. On the contrary, prisons and jails in the U.S. have always been used as a means of enforcing class hierarchy and white supremacy. In the words of geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore, prisons arose first to "discipline...people to the wage," particularly immigrants and non-whites (Intercepted, 2020). Descriptions of prison record groups on Ancestry provide none of this context, serving to carry the criminalization and dehumanization of marginalized communities into the present day. For example, in the Eastern State Penitentiary records on Ancestry, 38% of prisoners who entered the Philadelphia prison in 1920 were identified as Black, despite constituting only 7% of Philadelphia's population at that time. For Black genealogists, the presence of their ancestor in these records might be less a fun fact and more a painful signifier of racism.

In 2019, Ancestry announced in a much more somber tone the digitization of records from the Arolsen Archives in Germany documenting Nazi persecution (Ancestry.com, 2019). Ancestry received an outpouring of positive press for this effort, whereby Ancestry made the records from Arolsen available free of charge on their website. While this generosity is commendable, its motivations should be considered. As a *New York Times* article on the announcement of the partnership with Arolsen Archives put it, it is questionable "whether enticing people to sign up for a for-profit database with such sensitive public records was appropriate" (Murphy, 2019). Ancestry's slick advertisement promoting the "philanthropic" partnership with Arolsen should leave no doubt that the company hopes this donation will result in more revenue for the company. While researchers may begin with a search of the free records, they will inevitably reach a point where their desire to learn more about their ancestors brings them to Ancestry's

paywall.

While Ancestry puts out press releases for their publication of prison records and releases promotional videos for their digitization of Holocaust documents, I could not find any similar marketing for Ancestry's records on American slavery. One Ancestry advertisement that did focus on slavery backfired spectacularly, revealing the company's strategy for targeting white consumers (McClinton, 2019). The 2019 television advertisement depicted a white man proposing to an enslaved Black woman in the antebellum south, urging her to escape with him to the North, where they could be together.⁴ The ad concludes by showing a marriage certificate for the supposed couple. This fairytale of white saviorism is likely what some genealogists are seeking, and what Ancestry is profiting on. As Ruth Frankenberg (1997) points out, as discourses that critique whiteness and white privilege have gained traction, whites have been compelled to "embark urgently on the quest either to be proven innocent or find redemption" (p. 18). Ancestry's reimagining of interracial relations in the era of slavery is made all the more horrific by the historical truth that Black women were often raped by their white owners, and that the very nature of enslavement precluded consent. The impossibility of the scenario in Ancestry's advertisement was proven when it was demonstrated that the marriage certificate shown at the end of the advertisement was fabricated (Domby, 2019).

Enslavers in the Family Tree

Ancestry effectively erases the violence at the root of many family trees by failing to give users the ability to explain or acknowledge ancestors born of rape, particularly ancestors born to enslaved women and their enslavers. This brutality connects Black families to white families, yet genealogy websites fail to provide functionality that would make these connections obvious. In June 2020, Tarana Burke, activist and founder of the #MeToo movement, wrote a tweet condemning Ancestry for linking enslavers as spouses to those they enslaved and fathered children with (Burke, 2020). This tweet called out the hypocrisy of Ancestry's own message in support of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which had been issued days earlier and which stated that Ancestry was "committed to enabling every story to be found and shared—including difficult ones" (Ancestry, 2020). This commitment is not reflected on the website itself, where a search of Family Trees shows little overlap between trees of white and Black descendants of enslavers. This is due in part to how Ancestry guides the user to fill in their family tree, working from known parentage and grand-parentage upward, with suggestions from records and other users' Family Trees filling in the prior generations. With Ancestry's current algorithm it seems unlikely that a white genealogist will be suggested a link with a Black genealogist based on one common ancestor four or five generations removed. For Black genealogists descended from enslaved people and their enslavers, this connection, if able to be made through genetics or research or oral history, is unavoidable. Yet Ancestry gives these users no way for easily indicating this difficult history, or for linking their trees to the white families with which they share a common ancestor. In lieu of such a capability, Black users often add the word "enslaver" or "slaver" to the names of these ancestors.

For many generations, white Americans have denied the existence of their Black cousins because the truth of these relationships would shatter their romanticized family histories. This is the same willful ignorance that has allowed many statues and monuments honoring enslavers to remain standing in cities and towns across the U.S. for decades. That sentiment is being forcefully challenged in all corners by the Black Lives Matter movement (Somvichian-Clausen, 2020). As poet Caroline Randall Williams (2020) writes in her response to defenders of Confederate

monuments:

What is a monument but a standing memory? An artifact to make tangible the truth of the past. My body and blood are a tangible truth of the South and its past. The black people I come from were owned by the white people I come from. The white people I come from fought and died for their Lost Cause. And I ask you now, who dares to tell me to celebrate them?

Williams notes that while she has no white people in her family tree going back four generations, she is genetically more than half white. The substantiation of what Williams calls her “rape-colored skin” was veiled in the historical record but exposed through the science of genetic genealogy (Williams, 2020). More and more Americans are learning about their heritage through DNA testing, and Ancestry’s version of this service has brought the company millions of new customers who have been sold on the company’s problematic conceptualization of race as genetically identifiable.

AncestryDNA’s Essentialized Whiteness

The Science of Genetic Ancestry Testing

Black Americans have hailed DNA testing as a means of reclaiming ancestral ties severed or silenced by slavery. In the 2016 book, *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome*, sociologist Alondra Nelson (2016) details how genetic genealogy allows Black test-takers to uncover their African ancestry, enabling them to connect with a culture and history that was robbed of them by enslavement. As Nelson (2016) explains, the popularity of genetic ancestry tests reflects a faith in DNA as the ultimate truth-teller:

The special status afforded to DNA as the final arbiter of truth of identity is vividly apparent in the language we use to describe it...Hyperbolic phrases such as ‘code of the codes,’ ‘the holy grail,’ ‘the blueprint,’ the human ‘instruction book’ and ‘the secret of life’ suggest a core assumption about the perceived omnipotence of genetics. (p. 4)

Belief in DNA’s truth-telling capabilities is reinforced by the use of DNA evidence in criminal trials or for determining paternity. When it comes to the science of genetic ancestry, however, it has been widely shown that these tests are based on methods that produce anything but certain results (Roth & Ivemark, 2018; Bolnick et al., 2007). Humans share 99.9% of the same genetic make-up, with a greater amount of genetic difference occurring intragroup than between people of different racial or ethnic groups. That .1% of genetic difference is parsed by different genetic testing companies in various ways, but the bottom line is, as stated in an article in *Science*, “there is no clear-cut connection between an individual’s DNA and his or her racial or ethnic affiliation” (Bolnick et al., 2007, p. 400).

The marketing for Ancestry’s genetic testing services, AncestryDNA included, belies the shaky science. Results from AncestryDNA are presented in pie charts with specific percentages and maps showing the region of origin, sometimes down to the level of county or city. This precision obfuscates the influence of selective practices on the results, much in the same way that records or LifeHistories displayed on Ancestry lack context for their existence on the site. According to the documentation on AncestryDNA’s website, their test compares the customer’s DNA to the DNA of people in a reference panel—a proprietary database of DNA samples representing

different ethnicities and regions of the world. In order to be included in the reference panel, “people need two things: a paper trail that proves their family history, and DNA confirmation of their ethnicity” (Ancestry.com, “AncestryDNA reference panel”). Putting aside the circular logic of this explanation, the method still suggests the existence of a definitive genetic marker for ethnicity, which there is not (Bolnick et al., 2007). Additionally, inclusion in the reference panel is predicated on a “paper trail” documenting family origins in a given region, a requirement which would seemingly discount itinerant peoples, those without written traditions, and groups whose documents have been destroyed through war, poverty, and oppression. Rather than repairing painful holes in the archival record, as it claims to do, AncestryDNA risks reinforcing these absences through giving genetic value to only those who can prove, based on western documentary standards, their right to represent an ethnicity.⁵

Selling Essentialized Identity

The very notion of genetically defined ethnicities being promulgated through these testing services promotes an essentialist view of race in which there is something inherent and biological about being British, or Senegalese, or Jewish, or Chinese. AncestryDNA reinforces the primacy of biologically proven ethnicity through advertisements such as one in which a narrator speaking over video of a figure skater says that AncestryDNA will help discover where “you get your precision,” alongside a pie chart showing 48% Scandinavian ancestry, “your grace,” showing 12% Central Asian ancestry, and “your drive,” with 21% Great Britain ancestry (Ancestry, 2018). These ethnic stereotypes help Ancestry sell a product predicated on the importance of biological heritage to a person’s identity and authentic self.

In another AncestryDNA commercial, a middle-aged woman who had self-identified as Hispanic her entire life learns from her genetic test that she has DNA from all over the world, leading her to change how she identifies on the census from Hispanic to “other” (Ancestry, 2016). This advertisement unintentionally highlights one of the greatest perils of genetic ancestry testing: as both non-whites and whites change how they identify on the census and in applications for employment and school, government funding and social programs intended to support communities of color could be diluted.

In a study of how genetic ancestry test-takers’ identities changed after receiving their results, Wendy Roth and Biorn Ivermark (2018) found that over half of participants who previously identified as only white changed their ethnic or racial identity in some way after doing a genetic ancestry test. Of this group, most of them changed how they self-identified on the census. One white woman in the study who learned she had Native American DNA identified herself as Native American on a job application, highlighting how genetic ancestry testing can undermine affirmative action.⁶ It has also been reported (Harmon, 2006) that genetic ancestry test results have led to spurious claims to tribal membership, which Kim TallBear (2008), a scholar of Native American studies and a member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate tribe, identifies as a threat to tribal sovereignty. Regardless of the potential material impact of claiming a newly “discovered” ethnic or racial identity, Roth and Ivermark (2018) point out that the ability of white participants in their study to adopt these new identities reflects a fundamental privilege:

...the experience of being in the majority, and at the top of the racial hierarchy, allows them to see their race as normative and unexciting. The racial privilege that makes

whiteness invisible pushes them to aspire to be something else, to foster a more distinctive identity and sense of belonging. Yet in fostering even the option to adopt symbolic racial identities, the tests promote the idea that race can be costless and exist separately from the social and structural consequences with which society has imbued it. Those who incorporate new geneticized racial options can benefit from symbolic racial identities without the negative consequences, which may support a view that race is inconsequential today. In this way, genetic ancestry testing can reinforce race privilege among those who already experience it. Nonwhite respondents, even those who adopt new racial identities, rarely view race this way because their lived experience has taught them otherwise. (p. 178)

In promoting the idea of race as a biological fact, rather than a social construct people come to identify with through lived experience, Ancestry and its competitors are returning genealogy to its racist roots. Interest in genealogy experienced an analogous boom in the post-Civil War era, when eugenics emerged to provide a supposed scientific basis for white racial superiority. As Francois Weil (2013) explains in his history of American genealogy, "Within a few years heredity became an obsession, as well as a new rationale for genealogy. Its relation to biology and science now stood above its obvious connection to history" (p. 116).

Genetic Surveillance

In 2018, Ancestry was awarded the tongue-in-cheek Big Brother Award in the area of biotechnology for, "exploiting an interest in genealogy to entice people into submitting saliva samples" (Weichert, 2018).⁷ The award citation noted that the terms of service for AncestryDNA indicate that samples may be used by Ancestry and third-party "collaborators" for unspecified research. The Big Brother Award also notes the concerns raised by that year's revelation that the notorious "Golden State Killer" was identified and arrested using genetic information uploaded to the open-source genealogy database, GEDmatch. In the two years since, genetic genealogy databases have increasingly been used by law enforcement, leading to arrests in dozens of cold cases. As news about these techniques emerged, ethical questions about the use of genetic ancestry test results came to the fore (Moran, 2018; Kennett, 2019). Access to genealogy databases puts the genetic information of millions of Americans, most of whom have never committed a serious crime, into the hands of law enforcement. In her book on the drawbacks of genetic ancestry testing, Libby Copeland (2020) writes, "Once a database contained about three million people of European descent, 99 percent of the greater population of these Americans would be potentially identifiable, at which time the United States would essentially have...a de-facto national DNA database" (pp. 234-235). AncestryDNA's database contains, as of this writing, 18 million samples.

Unlike the online genealogical platforms GEDmatch and FamilyTreeDNA, Ancestry does not allow users to upload genetic samples processed by other companies, which precludes police from using the technique they have most commonly employed to solve crimes: uploading a DNA sample from a crime scene and matching that sample to relatives who have added their own samples to a genealogy database. However, as the industry leader in genetic ancestry testing, and one that aggressively markets the benefits of this service, Ancestry tests likely make up thousands of the samples present on sites like GEDmatch and FamilyTreeDNA. And while Ancestry currently only gives police access to its genetic database in cases where a subpoena or court order is issued, FamilyTreeDNA is a chilling example of how terms of service can change unbeknownst to users. This company had marketed itself as a privacy-conscious option for genetic genealogists, but in

2019 gave law enforcement access to their database without informing its customers (Copeland, 2020). To quell the outcry that ensued when customers learned about this cooperation, FamilyTreeDNA's competitor GEDmatch updated their privacy options so that all samples were hidden from law enforcement unless users specifically indicated they could be shared (Copeland, 2020). The impact of this change was nullified shortly afterward when a Florida judge granted a warrant to search the entire GEDmatch database. Erin Murphy, a law professor at New York University, called this ruling, "a signal that no genetic information can be safe" (Hill & Murphy, 2019). According to Hill and Murphy (2019), the ruling set the course for all genetic databases, especially Ancestry, to become law enforcement databases: "they will go to the mother lode: the 15-million-person Ancestry database...Why play in the peanuts when you can go to the big show?"

Even if Ancestry is not compelled by a court order to turn over their database to police, market forces may make this an inevitability. In February 2020, Ancestry laid off 6% of its workforce citing a decline in sales for AncestryDNA—it appears that most people who were interested in purchasing genetic genealogy tests had already done so (Lazarus, 2020). Will this financial situation compel Ancestry to turn to lucrative deals with law enforcement? A worrying sign of things to come is that FamilyTreeDNA, in a complete about-face from their previous privacy-conscious pitches, released an advertisement in 2019 featuring the father of kidnap victim Elizabeth Smart urging consumers to help solve crimes by uploading their genetic information to the service's database (Haplogroup, 2019). According to Erin Murphy, the eventual transformation of Ancestry into a law enforcement database will only be stopped by public outcry (Hill & Murphy, 2019). Hopefully the uprising against racism and police violence, which has seen a critical eye turned toward other surveillance partnerships between law enforcement and private companies, will produce this outcry. And while Ancestry does not currently have such a partnership, we should be concerned about the scope of data we have already turned over to this corporation.

These concerns became more urgent in August of 2020, when it was announced that the private equity fund Blackstone had acquired Ancestry for \$4.7 billion USD. Articles about the sale with headlines like "Private Equity Wants to Own your DNA" (Gandel, 2020) left little doubt as to what Blackstone found so valuable about Ancestry, a company that went private in 2012 for a mere \$1.7 billion USD. The acquisition of Ancestry came as Blackstone, the world's largest real estate owner, moved into the life sciences, spending more than \$1 billion USD in 2020 to invest in drugs for high cholesterol, kidney disease, and devices for people with diabetes (Perlberg, 2020). Owning the largest genetic database in the country gave Blackstone a backstage pass to health information for millions of AncestryDNA users. The troubling implications of Ancestry's new ownership was not lost on consumers, many of whom expressed their apprehension on social media, leading Ancestry and Blackstone to offer reassurances that their privacy policies would not be affected by the sale (Truong, 2020). Blackstone's track record on privacy raised particular concern how the company might respond to a request from law enforcement for access to their database. In 2019 another Blackstone property, the hotel chain Motel 6, settled multiple lawsuits accusing the company of turning over guest lists to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) without a warrant, a practice that resulted in the deportation of immigrants (Hsu, 2019).

Some of the articles reporting on Blackstone's acquisition made mention of the fact that it was a strange time to be investing so much in Ancestry, which, as noted, had seen a precipitous decline in sales for their genetic testing kits. Blackstone's (2020) press release on the purchase attempted to head off this skepticism, noting that Ancestry's "differentiated services" offer

millions of paid subscribers “unique content.” The valuable content alluded to is the thousands of records in Ancestry’s databases, records that originate in libraries and archives that partner with Ancestry to digitize their holdings. For a profession that has put such primacy on neutrality, collaboration with a company whose CEO made headlines for his partisan political donations (Oguh, 2020) should have provoked a real reckoning.

Archives-Ancestry Partnerships

Ancestry’s business plan is reliant on the supply of archival materials from public institutions at the local, state, and national level. The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) first entered into a partnership with Ancestry in 2008 and signed a new contract with the company in 2015. These agreements stipulate the terms for a partnership that is seen as beneficial to both parties: Ancestry digitizes records held by NARA in exchange for a five-year embargo period on providing access to these records; during that five-year period records digitized by Ancestry are only available on their website and onsite at NARA facilities (NARA, 2015). While partnerships with Ancestry have provided online access to millions of records at little or no cost to archival institutions, archives have also surrendered their ability to provide context for those records to the millions of users who access them through Ancestry and other similar websites. As has been outlined, Ancestry’s practices suggest, unsurprisingly, that they are driven first and foremost to give the researcher-as-customer what they want. Rarely does that include a critical perspective on race and ethnicity.

In a 2019 interview, David S. Ferriero, 10th archivist of the U.S., discussed his desire to digitize everything in NARA’s holdings in the same breath as he praised the archives’ partnership with Ancestry. The highest-ranking public archivist in the U.S. views public access to records and private partnerships as two sides of the same coin (Assimakopoulos, 2019). While other countries have similarly sought to increase public access to archives through digitization, they have done so through increased governmental funding and community empowerment. In the U.S., as Noah Lenstra (2010) puts it, the solution has been a commodification of our cultural heritage. In fact, by outsourcing the demand for online access to public records to companies such as Ancestry, institutions like NARA are sacrificing an opportunity to seek increased public funding (Benson, 2008). As Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) writes in her book on racial bias in Google’s search algorithms:

At a time when state funding for public goods such as universities, schools, libraries, archives, and other memory institutions is in decline in the U.S., private corporations are providing products, services, and financing on their behalf. With these trade-offs comes an exercising of greater control over the information, which is deeply consequential for those who are already systematically oppressed. (p. 123)

Noble explains that search algorithms are built on metadata, metadata that carries biases. An understanding of oppression in organizational systems is nothing new to the field of library science, where discussions about the racism of Library of Congress Subject Headings is decades old (Knowlton, 2005), but, unfortunately, no less pressing today. The past decade has seen the archives field grappling with how to undo years of oppressive collecting, description, and access policies. In contrast, for-profit companies such as Ancestry have little incentive to engage in a social justice analysis of their services. By outsourcing metadata creation to these companies, archival institutions risk turning back the clock on inclusive practices that have taken years to develop and implement.

On June 23, 2020, as Black Lives Matter protests ignited by the police murders of George Floyd in Minneapolis and Breonna Taylor in Louisville swept the country, the Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH) issued a "Statement of Recommitment." This statement acknowledged the prevalence of systemic racism, the institution's roots in a legacy of racism, and the work that remained to be done in order to address ongoing inequality. The archive was lauded for recognizing its original sin: "The State of Alabama founded the department in 1901 to address a lack of proper management of government records, but also to serve a white southern concern for the preservation of Confederate history and the promotion of Lost Cause ideals" (Alabama Department of Archives & History, 2020)⁸. ADAH (2020) also pledged to:

model and advocate for responsible stewardship of historical materials held by collecting institutions as well as in the public square. As communities struggle with decisions over Confederate iconography, we assert that options are not limited to static persistence, on the one hand, or to destruction on the other.

One way this sentiment could be put into action is through a careful review of the practices of one of ADAH's private partners, Ancestry.

Confederate iconography proliferates on the pages of Findagrave.com, a subsidiary of Ancestry. Findagrave.com is a crowd-sourced genealogy website where users upload photographs of tombstones, add biographical information for grave occupants, and leave virtual flowers commemorating the dead. Ancestry purchased Findagrave.com in 2013 and information from the website is discoverable through the central Ancestry search tool. It is not uncommon to come across virtual graves on Findagrave.com decorated with Confederate flags and mottos. In response to these displays of Confederate pride, in the spring of 2020, I posted slave schedules and census forms to the gravesites of enslavers, documenting their participation in slavery. Shortly after making these postings, my account was discontinued, and my posts were removed without explanation. Messages to Findagrave.com and Ancestry seeking an explanation for the cancellation of my account went unanswered.⁹ Their silence suggests that Findagrave.com, and by extension, Ancestry, censors biographical information, catering to the desires of those who use the site to promote the "Lost Cause" and deny the historical reality of slavery.

Some archive institutions may argue that the actions of Findagrave.com are irrelevant to their relationship with the website's parent company, but digitization contracts between archives and Ancestry often turn the archive into an advertiser for the company's services, including Findagrave.com. In NARA's (2015) current contract with Ancestry, the archive agrees to "provide a direct link from NAC [National Archives Catalog] or its successor to an agreed upon page on the Ancestry Network which includes the Digital Materials" and, during the period of embargo, digitized documents are available onsite at NARA facilities via computers that connect to Ancestry (NARA, 2015). Similarly, Ancestry provides links to NARA from their website and includes their logo on databases. In this way, the line is blurred between the public good supplied by NARA and the private interests served by Ancestry. Given the many problematic aspects of Ancestry's genealogical research services, AncestryDNA, and Findagrave.com, archives must consider whether their partnership serves as an endorsement of these practices.

In Adam Kriesberg's 2017 study of public-private archival partnerships, he found that most archivists who had worked with a private partner felt the relationship was beneficial to the archive. At the same time, many of the archivists Kriesberg interviewed expressed concerns over the quality of metadata produced through outsourcing, the physical safety of materials

transported offsite for digitization, and the way that online access to documents through private websites obfuscates the provenance of records. Kriesberg (2017) notes these reservations have made archivists savvier in negotiating contracts with private partners. Ancestry's practices also compel archivists and other information professionals to exercise ethical scrutiny in their negotiations with the company. Just as embargo periods, confidentiality, and preservation standards are now considered contractual sticking points, so too could archivists and librarians insist that digitized documents are indexed by Ancestry's central search engine, limit the use of public materials to promote genetic testing, and set guidelines for anti-oppressive descriptive metadata, to give just a few examples.

Conclusion

Archivists and genealogists are mutually dependent: archives rely on family history researchers, who make up the majority of archives users, and genealogists need access to archival material and the expertise of archivists (Mills, 2003). In recent years, however, archives have ceded their identity to companies like Ancestry, which now owns the URL "archives.com" (Archives.com, n.d.). As private websites like Ancestry become synonymous with archives, we have a professional obligation to critically interrogate these companies and consider if partnering with them furthers our values and ethics. Safiya Noble (2018) writes:

We need more intense attention on how these types of artificial intelligence, under the auspices of individual freedom to make choices, forestall the ability to see what kinds of choices we are making and the collective impact of these choices in reversing decades of struggle for social, political, and economic equality. (p. 167)

While Noble is speaking here about how the search functionalities of Zillow, the online real estate database, reinforce neighborhood segregation, this example applies equally to Ancestry.

In contrast to archives, which seek to provide material that complicates or nuances historical narratives, Ancestry markets in essentialized ethnic identities and presents information in a manner that glosses over racial conflict. The implications of these practices are particularly troubling when it comes to white users of the website. Ancestry tells me little about the wealth my paternal ancestors built through enslavement, or how my great-grandfather's white skin allowed him to drop his Jewish last name and thereby gain access to home loans, educational opportunities, and jobs that were denied to his non-white countrymen. These genealogical facts and hard racial truths have done more to shape my present condition than the parades my ancestors might have witnessed, or even how they immigrated to this country. When millions of white Americans construct family and ethnic identity through a website that permits them to selectively ignore racial oppression, there is a societal impact. By entering into eager partnerships with this company, information professionals suggest that criticality ends at their front door. Implementing social justice policies in our repositories, while leaving the practices of our private partners unquestioned, amounts to an ethical concession we should not be willing to make.

Endnotes

¹ From here on, Ancestry is used to refer to the company Ancestry.com LLC.

² See <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8055/>.

³ See for example, Ancestry's African American family history research guide at https://www.ancestrycdn.com/mars/landing/africanamerican/africanamerican_guide_2015.pdf.

⁴ The commercial is available at <https://youtu.be/Mvg17TsktEU>.

⁵ See Ram et al. (2018) for more information on how European regions are overrepresented in many genetic ancestry databases as compared to peoples in Asia and Africa.

⁶ See Harmon (2006) for more examples of white genetic ancestry test-takers claiming benefits and rights reserved for non-whites.

⁷ The Big Brother Awards are given annually to companies, organizations, and government agencies whose practices are seen as a threat to privacy. The Awards are intended to raise awareness on issues of personal privacy rights.

⁸ The "Lost Cause" is a historical view espoused by sympathizers of the Southern Confederacy, who promote the idea that the Civil War was a noble fight for state's rights and had little to do with slavery.

⁹ See <https://medium.com/@a.robinsonsweet/confederate-pride-and-censorship-of-slavery-stories-on-family-history-website-findagrave-com-bd9ac972108d> for more information on my effort to make histories of enslavement visible on Findagrave.com.

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