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ABSTRACT

The last twenty years have seen the emergence of "genealogical machines" that promise to revolutionize family history research. This article examines the tracing practices involved in these technologies, and their impact on shaping current concepts of kinship, drawing on two case studies: one relates to the efforts of Icelandic descendants in North America to reinsert themselves into the national family tree; the other follows the attempts by an Icelandic man to establish ties with the father he never met.
Keywords: Kinship. DNA tests. Genealogy. Iceland. Ancestry.

"Unlock the family story in your DNA. AncestryDNA® can reveal your heritage and connect you to family past and present." This declaration is typical of the messages promoted by the global "genetic-genealogical" services industry that has emerged over the last twenty years, encouraging users to imagine that their most intimate identity is written into the text of their own body. With their impressive genetic and genealogical databases, companies like AncestryDNA and 23andMe provide the service of comparing their users' DNA with samples taken from various populations around the world in order to decode their so-called "ethnic mix." At the same time, the development of increasingly refined algorithms, designed to "suggest" ancestral links between users based on shared genome segments or common last names in their family trees, indicates a shift toward the automation of family history research, clearly centered around a strictly genetic understanding of kinship.

At first glance, this idea that DNA can reveal our family connections and histories may seem to contradict the assertions of anthropologists who hold that "the principle of choice lies at the heart of recent changes in the idea of kinship in Western society" (Fine 1998, 1). In fact, the essentialist discourse of these companies has been undermined by the trend of choice that continues to drive genealogical practices. According to Catherine Nash, genealogy is an "empirical and imaginative effort [. . .] that involves making choices about what line to follow, which clues to pursue" (Nash 2008, 17). This means not only obtaining and assembling information about one's ancestors, but also building relationships with them, between the living and the dead (Cannell 2011).

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This process requires that decisions be made about which connections to maintain and which to abandon (Edwards 2018, 726).

In this article, we investigate the weight that is often given to DNA as an essential, revelatory "trace" of identity and of biological kinship, focusing primarily on tracing practices that use the novel "genealogical machines" (Pálsson 2007, 78) created by the genetic-genealogical industry. However, as we will see, these machines require supervision and contextual knowledge in order to get to the heart of a person's ancestry. The biomarkers that they depend on may be imprecise or unstable; sometimes, essential information is missing. In particular, we examine the attention paid to personal names, and the dilemmas they pose as identifiers and loci of identity. As a privileged resource for tracing genealogies, names can both confer an individual identity and embody family relationships between the living and the dead. However, they are unstable, undergoing changes via the processes of migration, transculturation, and marriage. This creates interpretation problems for those attempting to reconstruct these identity networks.

Our analysis is based on two case studies related to Iceland that concern, in different ways, the uses of genealogical machines to find ancestors. The first example is paradigmatic of "root-seeking" by members of diaspora groups in order to reestablish ties with a nation "of origin" that they see as more attractive, more authentic, than their "adoptive" society (see, for example, Nelson 2016). We will observe in particular the efforts of Icelandic descendants in North America to "reconnect" to the social life, kinship networks, and soil of Iceland through the creation of their own genealogical machine. Our second case study looks at a different category of genetic-genealogical platform users: those looking for an unknown biological parent. We rely on a genealogical investigation undertaken in collaboration with an informant who was seeking to establish ties with his father, a man he had never known, who had left Iceland before he was born. Unlike in the first case study, here the desire to investigate one's origins is driven by silences and lacunae, and the body seems to take on a particular importance as the link to a lost parent.

To use the terms put forth by Jeanette Edwards (2014, 46), the "biological facts" of kinship always need to be socially activated in order to assume their cultural significance. From this perspective, we may wonder: What techniques and knowledge can be used to bridge the gap between evidence of a genealogical link and the materialization of a kinship relationship between subjects? What are the necessary conditions for cementing these ties, eliciting mutual recognition between strangers and turning them into family? In cultural contexts where maintaining "bloodlines" carries significant social weight, what space is left for choice, whether to sever ties with undesired relatives or to define one's own identity?

■ The Books of Icelanders

Iceland is the only country in the world to have created a genetic-genealogical database designed to trace all the biological relationships between its citizens. This project was made possible by the wealth of genealogical data accumulated on Icelandic families, dating from the time the island was first colonized: from the ancient Book of Settlements (*Landnámabók*), written around 1125, and the Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*), to the many parish registers, censuses, administrative files, family genealogies, and national databases compiled since the medieval era. These historical records document not only a person's position within a network of "natural" and social relationships, but also their profession, their character, their appearance, their dispositions, as well as the medical traits related to certain family lines.

In the 1990s, the Icelandic software company FRISK Software began to build a digital database using historical census data, as well as contemporary registries, in order to reconstitute the nation's genealogical history over the last three centuries. Before long, FRISK signed an agreement with a biotech company, deCODE genetics, which seized the opportunity to use this resource to advance its own genetic and biomedical research on a national scale. Thanks to this partnership, FRISK was able to build a database comprising the names of around 700,000 individuals—just over half of all people born in Iceland since Scandinavian colonization began in the ninth century. A version of the database born of this collaboration, the Book of Icelanders (*Íslendingabók*), was put online in 2003, and a second encrypted and anonymous version, including genetic medical data, was reserved for use by deCODE scientists.

The Book of Icelanders has two main purposes: it allows its users to navigate their own family history,

and it provides the opportunity to calculate degrees of genealogical connection with other Icelanders (living or dead) listed in the database (Illustration 1). The Book was received with enthusiasm by the Icelandic public. After it was released, it quickly became a kind of game played at festive events, but also a way of thinking about and solidifying relationships. Families and work colleagues had fun exploring their mutual connections during community events, young people used it as a way to speculate about potential partners and "good catches," and young girls used it to explore the genealogical connections they might have with their friends.

However, users quickly began to contact the site's administrators to report content errors they had found (Pálsson 2007, 76–77). The fact that the Icelandic public felt the need to "correct" the connections presented in the Book, so that they would better represent the truth of their family relationships as they understood them, reflects the social significance attributed to the site. These corrections helped to perfect this interactive model of the national population, making its components and the complex connections between them more legible. Some corrections—fixing genetic kinship errors—were also incorporated in the encrypted version maintained by deCODE for its biomedical project, which aimed to create an exact representation of the national population's genetic history in order to further its research on the inheritance of genetic conditions and traits. In its two forms, the Book of Icelanders thus constitutes a biosocial project that is renewed and updated at regular intervals.

The Book's launch promoted the idea that all Icelanders share fairly close kinship ties, evoking an image of the nation as an extended family. However, the story that the Book tells about the Icelandic population is not exhaustive. The experience of the site for first- or second-generation immigrant Icelanders, for example, is very limited, especially if their families are not incorporated into the national genealogical tree by "blood" ties. The database also has lacunae, especially in historical cases where a child's paternity is unknown or not recorded, and it only includes historical individuals who had living descendants at the time when the Book was created—in other words, the ancestors of contemporary citizens, as understood from a strictly linear and genetic perspective. It also excludes most descendants of the *Vesturfarar*: the roughly 15,000 people who emigrated from Iceland to Brazil and North America between 1863 and 1914. Today, there are around 40,000 US citizens and 100,000 Canadian citizens who claim to be Icelandic descendants.[1]

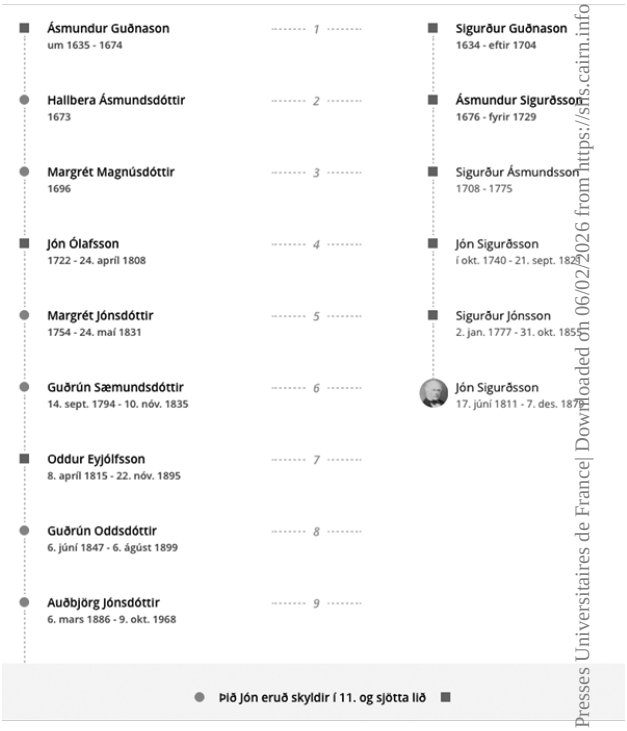

Illustration 1 – Relationship calculator from the Book of Icelanders. The text indicates the following result: "You and Jón are eleventh cousins." (source: Abel and Pálsson)

Over the last century, various organizations have worked to nourish this ancestral connection between Iceland and diaspora populations in the United States and Canada. For example, the Icelandic National League of North America (INLNA) was founded in Winnipeg in 1919, and a partner organization, the Icelandic National League (INL), was established in Reykjavik twenty years later, in 1939. Working together, these two organizations have coordinated various long-term programs and activities, with the goal of promoting Icelandic culture, language, and literature among diaspora populations in North America, as well as more general efforts to maintain connections between Iceland and self-declared "Western Icelanders."[2] Over the last few decades, in particular, there has been a noticeable intensification of efforts to use genealogy as a means of connecting Icelandic descendants with their relatives in Iceland, in a manifestation of what Nina Glick Schiller (2005) has called practices of "long-distance nationalism." While this phenomenon is not limited to Icelandic descendants (Nash 2008; Nelson 2016), we would like to draw attention here to

the way in which the keeping of genealogical registers, on both sides of the Atlantic, has led to the emergence of a new genealogical machine that serves to arbitrate and validate the demands of those seeking to revive their connection with the "homeland."

The culture of ancestry

Icelandic Roots is a non-profit organization founded in 2013 by Sunna Furstenau, an American Icelandic descendant. The primary goal of the organization is to create a platform bringing together different kinds of information about the family histories of Western Icelanders. At the heart of this project is a large restricted-access database, focused on the genealogies of Icelandic descendants in North America and designed to help them reconstruct and explore their ancestral connections to Iceland. So far, the organization estimates that it has helped more than 1,200 users to do just this, three-quarters of them from North America and the rest from Iceland.[3]

Migrant communities often maintain strong feelings of belonging to their country of origin, as Glick Schiller explains:

> The majority of emigrants at the turn of the twentieth century were transmigrants who lived their lives across borders [. . .]. That is to say, many of the persons who migrated came to obtain capital for family projects back home [. . .]. They became long-distance nationalists, espousing ideas about belonging that linked them with people in their homeland and taking action on behalf of their ancestral territory. (Glick Schiller 2005, 294)

For Icelandic emigrants in Canada and the United States, the feeling of belonging to an ethnic community was initially reinforced by the continuation of traditional jobs (especially fishing), the circulation of local literature and magazines published in Icelandic, and attendance at the Evangelical Lutheran Church (the National Church of Iceland since the sixteenth century) (Hermannsson 1916). Many migrants continued to write to their family in Iceland throughout their lives, even if they never returned in person (Guðmundsson 2001). After two or three generations living in America, however, this connection became mostly symbolic. Today, according to Anne Brydon, "making ethnic identity has become the project for organizations and institutions which strive to generate it self-consciously by evoking certain foods, songs, stories, and other nostalgic references to an idealized past" (Brydon 1997, 94).

Sunna herself grew up hearing her paternal grandparents talk about Iceland (her mother's family was not Icelandic in origin), and when she was a young girl she immersed herself in the Icelandic traditions of her hometown in North Dakota. She was baptized and married in one of the oldest Lutheran churches in North America, where she remembers speaking and singing in Icelandic until the end of high school. Genealogy has long been one of her passions: she wrote two books about the origins of her maternal family (going back to Norway, Scotland, and Ireland) before turning to the history of her Icelandic family. The idea of founding Icelandic Roots was inspired by a trip to Iceland in 2009. The following year, Sunna became the INL representative for the United States, and in 2011 she gave a talk to members of the League entitled "The Love of Iceland in North America." In 2012, she was invited to return to Iceland to give the same talk at several venues around the country. During this tour, she was shocked and moved to discover that her speech, which included stories that had been passed down her family for three generations, often elicited powerful reactions from her Icelandic audience. In her words:

> Everywhere I go, where I speak, people just fall, they just cry. And there was this lady – I'll never forget – she was this princess mayor's wife from Akureyri, and when I'd met her before she was just so regal, just this queen of a person with her nose a little bit in the air [...]. And when I gave the speech in Akureyri, she was crying so hard that she was just shaking, and she could barely breathe. And afterwards she said, "I've never heard that story before, and I have family that left, but we thought that – we didn't know this side of the story."

Sunna's first genealogical project was called *Cousins Across the Ocean*, an initiative she undertook on a voluntary basis in collaboration with Hálfdan Helgason, an Icelandic genealogist who, over several decades, has compiled his own database on Icelandic emigrants. The goal of this project is to reestablish connections between long-lost relatives in Iceland and North America by retracing their respective genealogies from a common ancestor in order to find their living descendants on both sides of the ocean. The Icelandic Roots project, however, has an even more ambitious goal: to create a scrupulously detailed database of the genealogies of Western Icelanders, which would allow them to learn

more about their family history and to contact any relatives living in Iceland. The Icelandic Roots Database (IRDB), developed based on the original collection of 512,000 names compiled by Hálfdan—with a further 100,000 names added between 2013 and 2017—is maintained on a voluntary basis by a group of around twenty historians and genealogists spread across Iceland and North America. Customers can purchase a membership that provides access to the database and to genealogical services for $150 per year.

Names, soil, blood

According to Sunna, the fact that the IRDB does not allow direct contributions from users is part of what sets it apart from most of the commercial genealogical platforms that have emerged over the last two decades. In her words: "We check everything. So if someone sends us information about their family, we will only use it as a starting point." Sunna's wariness of the reliability of Western Icelanders' genealogical memory is born of her own research experiences. In fact, her research revealed that some important identifying information about one of her ancestors had likely been misrepresented or modified at some point. Name changes are a particular problem in this regard.

In Iceland, individuals are listed and known mostly by their first name, which embodies their *persona* (Pálsson 2014, 622). Children are often given one of a limited number of traditional first names, along with a patronymic (or, more rarely, a matronymic) surname, identifying the subject's father (or mother). Thus, the patronymic "Jónsson" or "Jónsdóttir" signifies that the person in question is the son or daughter of a man named Jón. Also, as in other traditional European societies (Fine 1987), the convention of naming newborns after deceased ancestors remains firmly established, such that first names tend to be recycled within a family line, the identity of which is also forged in reference to an ancestral homeland, or "soil." This means that, as Christophe Pons has noted, the Icelandic conception of the person is entrenched both in that of the lineage group and in a feeling of belonging to the founding soil of the lineage (Pons 2002, 74).

In general, Icelanders do not change their name when they marry, instead keeping their patronymic throughout their life. However, after their arrival in North America, Icelandic migrants were forced to change their naming practices. In order to acquire property or complete other bureaucratic tasks in Canada and the United States, migrants had to adopt a fixed surname. Sometimes, they adopted (or were assigned by state agents) an anglicized version of their patronymic, or that of a relative. Other times, they invented a new surname based on Icelandic places or words (for example, their family's soil). First names, too, were often anglicized, both on individual initiative and, over time, due to the corrosive effect of memory. As Sunna explains, a migrant named Ólöf in Iceland might become "Olive" to her American descendants, while a family name like "Stone" might be hiding the original patronymic that identified Ólöf with her father in Iceland.

Names can therefore be considered biosocial identity markers: they position their bearers within genealogies, social networks, and nation-states—spheres that sometimes require the application of contradictory conventions. Names, however, are not fixed coordinates. As in other social contexts, such as slavery, forced name changes can disrupt an individual's identity, and that of their descendants, by depriving them of an identifier that connects them to their relatives, as well as to a larger cultural community (Abel et al. 2019). For example, an Icelandic migrant Jón Jónsson, who arrived in Canada in 1903, expressed in several letters to his family back in Iceland his disappointment at the lack of genealogical interest among Canadian Icelanders. He especially lamented the inability of later generations to remember the patronymics of their Icelandic grandmothers. He believed that this amnesia, triggered by the "monkey business" of the imposition of family names, prevented young people from preserving the memory of the individuality of their foremothers, to whom "children owe most" (Jónsdóttir 2016, 23).

For Sunna and other genealogists, however, recovering the "real name" of a first-generation immigrant makes it possible to find this individual in the original Icelandic registers and to reestablish the connection with their ancestors and their direct relatives in their country of birth. Once it has been cross-checked with the historical registers, the completed lineage may be recorded in the database and users will be able to search for names within it. This process underlies one of the IRDB's most prized features: the "relationship calculator," which, much like the Book of Icelanders, is designed to determine the degree of genealogical kinship between any Icelander and/or Icelandic descendant, living or dead. The idea is that by reestablishing these connections the IRDB will help members

of the diaspora to reconnect their roots to the national family tree, integrating them smoothly, authenticated by the rigorous work of its genealogists.

Activating the "biological facts" of kinship

Icelandic Roots' reputation for producing solid genealogies helped secure the organization greater involvement in new Icelandic programs to reestablish ties with the North America diaspora. Since 2016, Icelandic Roots has been collaborating with the Snorri Program,[4] a cultural exchange initiative founded in 1999 by the Icelandic National League. Ásta Sól Kristjánsdóttir, head of the program until 2018, explained that the project was designed to respond to the concern that relations with Western Icelanders "would just fade away," and it focuses specifically on young Canadian and American Icelandic descendants. To participate in the program, candidates must submit what they already know about their genealogical lineage, and, with help from Book of Icelanders administrators, the program coordinators try to locate any relatives still living in Iceland. The end goal is to find, for each participant, a homestay placement with cousins or close relatives. Ásta Sól notes that Icelandic families often have no idea that they had relatives in North America, but, in almost all cases, they enthusiastically welcome them into their homes. During their six-week stay, participants are encouraged to "live like Icelanders": doing volunteer work, learning Icelandic, and meeting people. During this time, they also have free access to the IRDB, which allows them to explore their relationships with new acquaintances. Before they return to North America, each participant receives a personalized family tree produced by the Book of Icelanders, going back ten generations.

In this way, the IRDB makes up for the Book of Icelanders' restrictions, since access is usually granted only to people with an Icelandic social security number. Thus, Icelandic descendants are given the possibility to participate in games of kinship with the same fluidity as "born-and-bred" Icelanders. In these interactions, digital networks and paper copies of family trees help to solidify relationships between strangers, serving as proof of the "biological fact" of shared connections, helping to "activate" these ties through interactions and social experiences (Edwards 2014, 46). Even if these connections are not necessarily genetic in nature (for example, the Snorri Program also accepts individuals adopted by Icelandic families), the assumption that these feelings of belonging are anchored in the unbroken flow of "Icelandic blood" remains strong. As Glick Schiller (2005) observes, talk of "blood" and "peoples" always evokes racial conceptions of collective identities, even though these metaphors may contain multiple, contradictory meanings. Throughout our conversations, Sunna and Ásta Sól often referred anecdotally to the proportion of Icelandic ancestry of people they knew. However, their comments sometimes highlighted the *disconnect* between a person's proportion of ancestry—and thus the genealogical distance between the individual and their Icelandic origin—and their feeling of connection with Iceland. For example, Sunna spoke with amusement about her own children's interest in the country, even though they "are only a fourth Icelandic."

In fact, the proportion of "Icelandic ancestry" itself is not necessarily seen by these projects as a useful concept for guiding genealogical research. Icelandic Roots sometimes receives DNA test reports from its users, generated by large companies like 23andMe or AncestryDNA. These analyses look at hundreds of thousands of loci in the user's genome, comparing them with the statistical incidence of "informative" alleles found in reference populations, which are meant to represent different "ethnic groups" or "genetic homelands" around the world. The results are delivered in the form of a list of percentages (often alongside a map of the world) expressing the individual's "ancestral mix" (Abel 2016). Despite the "precision" of these calculations, often vaunted in the companies' advertising material, the data are generally judged to be too vague to provide meaningful information on an individual's Icelandic origins. According to Sunna: "The basic DNA stuff says, 'You're Scandinavian.' Yeah, *I know that*! It's not very helpful, especially as we're all fifth and sixth and seventh cousins." The appeal of Icelandic Roots' service is that it makes explicit the multiple genetic connections that Western Icelanders still share with members of the Icelandic population today, despite all the processes of acculturation and mixing at play in North America.

For some users, tracing their genealogy is a kind of preparatory step before making a first "return" trip to a homeland that their ancestors reluctantly left but that lives on in the memory of their descendants. Sometimes, arriving on Icelandic soil elicits strong feelings of catharsis, which seem to confirm the existence of a "natural" link between soil, blood, and people. A Canadian member stated:

> I found that [. . .] Iceland runs not only in my blood, but also deep into my soul. Which explains why, when I went to Iceland in 2009, I felt I was. . . HOME. It was like, when my feet touched the ground at Keflavik airport, I could "hear" the crackling of tree roots growing out from my feet, into the ground and out into the land!

This expression recalls the terms used by one of Christophe Pons' Icelandic informants, who described the "mystical particularity" of his home town, something that Pons explains as "the emotion that he [the informant] feels when he returns to his *soil*, when he rediscovers the cultural configuration of his lineage, through which he enters a space where he *exists* and where he *participates*" (Pons 2002, 74).

Among Icelandic descendants, this "mystical" connection is preserved in multiple ways, despite the distance: in family stories, linguistic culture, and traditional first names, which also signify the preservation of an uninterrupted cultural and genetic connection with the homeland. The role of genealogical machines and practices in this context is therefore both symbolic and political: they help to authenticate Icelandic descendants' demands for recognition from their nation of "origin," while also expanding the concept of Icelandic identity beyond the country's borders. For families without a rich cultural memory, the IRDB also serves as a collective resource for recovering lost knowledge about their origins. For this reason, the site includes a large database of original documents, a vast catalog of photographs of individuals, landscapes, cemeteries, boats, and ancestral farms, and even detailed histories carefully compiled by the administrators.

This second function of the IRDB seems to respond to the fact that ancestral identity must be both inherited *and* chosen, something that Sunna has experienced firsthand. She recalls going to Iceland for the first time in April 2005, immediately after a trip to Paris, a city she found both beautiful and charming. Iceland was the complete opposite: bleak, cold, scoured by devilish winds. Crushed with disappointment and not finding anything that resembled the "beautiful and fabulous" country described by her great-grandparents, Sunna cried every day of her trip. After returning to the United States, however, she realized that this reaction was inevitable, as her expectations of her ancestral homeland had been so great. So, in 2009, she went back for two weeks with the aim of traveling around the country and meeting her Icelandic cousins. In her words, "I decided to love Iceland for what it is, and the people, and the places."

In the examples described above, the feeling of belonging to a "big Icelandic family" that the genealogists sought to confirm is often overdetermined by a plurality of cultural traits and memories that have been explicitly preserved over generations. What happens, though, when a subject tries to reconstruct a family connection that exists only in scattered traces, and when the feeling of identity must contend with silences and omissions?

■ Related strangers

For most Icelanders, it is rare to have family origins outside of the island. Until the mid-twentieth century, the country welcomed few immigrants, and Icelanders have historically been considered very ethnically homogeneous. One of the first major events to disrupt this status quo was the Second World War, during which the island was occupied by British, US, and Canadian troops. Some of these soldiers had relationships with Icelandic women, who were stigmatized by their compatriots, especially when these relationships bore children (Björnsdóttir 1989). Today, many of these men and women are deceased or elderly, and their children and grandchildren are starting to revisit their histories, both in public and in private.[5]

Jón,[6] the focal point of our second case study, was born of such circumstances. His mother, Anna, was an Icelandic nurse who had a love affair with a young American, David, between 1946 and 1948. David was a demobilized soldier who was working as a cook at Keflavik airport, which served as a US military base at the time. Toward the end of 1948, David got on a plane and flew back to the United States. Jón was born seven months later.

Our work with Jón began in 2016. Together, we developed the idea for a collaborative genealogical experiment: as anthropologists, we would help Jón with his research by pursuing his lines of inquiry: Was Jón's father still alive, and did he have brothers or sisters, or any other living relatives? If Jón's father had died, what was the cause? For our part, we were interested in the tracing processes and other practices that might contribute to the mutual recognition of new relatives. What motivates subjects to seek out an unknown relative? What power do genealogical machines have in the reconstruction of ancestry when family memory is almost completely absent? Is such biosocial evidence

sufficient to create a kinship relationship, or even a feeling of family, between strangers? These questions, in this order, shaped the reflections that follow.

Suppressed memories and speaking bodies

In her study of reunions between adopted children and their biological parents in the United Kingdom, Janet Carsten observed that individuals who grew up without one or both biological parents often feel a strong desire to identify them or to meet them. This is related to a "concern with recovering a lost biography, with becoming a complete person, and with a desire to fill in the gaps." She continues: "We can detect an implicit comparison by those interviewed between themselves and those brought up by birth parents" (Carsten 2000, 694).

For his part, Jón remembers his childhood as a happy time. An only child, he was brought up by his mother and his grandmother in a small coastal community in Iceland, part of a large and loving family. While other sons and daughters of foreign soldiers have described being bullied or humiliated because of their parentage, Jón says that as a child he never felt different from his peers. He was always curious to know more about who his father was, but his mother avoided talking about him when Jón was little, so he learned not to ask questions about the subject. However, at the age of 45, he began to suffer from frequent insomnia and went to see a psychologist, who suggested that trying to find his father might help. To this end, Jón obtained a list of US citizens with his father's name, but there were too many; it was impossible to know which one was the "real" David. It was only after Anna passed away in 2004 that Jón resumed his research. He tried to find a stack of letters that his mother had spoken of before her death, but to no avail: it seemed she had burned them. The only other trace he had of his father was a photograph taken by Anna during their love affair.

In our conversations, Jón expressed ambivalence about his desire to know his father. For example, he insisted that during his childhood, "that has never been a problem, that there was no father in my life, that he was from a foreign land." Like many others who decide to delve into genealogical research, his desire to learn more about his father was rekindled by the death of his mother and the birth of his own grandchildren, which provoked, to use Fenella Cannell's words, a "process of thinking about mortality and about what can be passed on to future generations" (Cannell 2011, 472). His psychologist, however, believed that Jón's "ordinary" curiosity about his father was actually masking a deeper, even visceral need to bring this absent figure back into his life. Jón was resistant to this diagnosis. According to him, it was "bullshit. [. . .] I think that my [sleep] trouble has nothing to do with that. I am sure about that."

According to Foucault, psychologists' clinics and offices are places specifically designed for "combining confession with examination," where experts try to extract truths, which are sometimes repressed, from the body and from the unconscious, in order to treat them (Foucault 1978 [1976], 65). For example, psychologists observe that parents' efforts to repress grief over an unresolved loss are often involuntarily transmitted onto their children (Tisseron 2007). These phenomena are explained by social and ecological structures that cause health problems, triggering cycles of violence and leaving "epigenetic markers" that are transmitted within the body itself. These approaches rely on the idea of embodiment, "that while bodies tell [his]stories, they reveal stories that are also not conscious, hidden, forbidden, or even denied by individuals or groups" (Walters et al. 2011, 184).

This psychological model introduces a paradox: How to reconcile a body that "wants to speak" about its ancestry and the will of subjects who prefer to forget the past? For Jón, the desire to know more about his father seems to have been fueled by his mother's stubborn silence on the matter and, later, by her destruction of David's letters. These mute actions are difficult to interpret after the fact: Was she trying to protect her son from her own grief regarding David's departure? Was it an attempt to normalize for Jón's sake an unorthodox family situation stigmatized by society in general? Or was she seeking to erase David—and the father figure more generally—from her family structure?

Whatever the reason, Anna's silence came into conflict with the demands of the Icelandic state, which requires that newborns' fathers be formally identified. David's name is therefore recorded on Jón's birth certificate and expressed in his patronymic (Davíðsson), making him a constant absent presence in his son's life. These mandatory inclusions of the father's name reflect the lack of autonomy of single mothers and their children in Iceland at the time Jón was born (Garðarsdóttir 2000), a system that has recently been challenged by feminist critics.[7] Also, as Christophe Pons explains, naming practices in Iceland often respond directly

to the demands of ancestors themselves, who appear in dreams to give advice or make requests about the naming of a newborn. These conditions produce a kind of determinism: culturally, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to free oneself from one's lineage, which is thought to have a significant impact on an individual's destiny (*örlög*) and on that of their own descendants (Pons 2002, 86–88).

Ancestry is often considered important for other reasons, too. For example, like many individuals looking for a biological parent, Jón was driven by the desire to learn about his paternal family's medical history. In some instances, learning about a congenital disease can influence the reproductive decisions of future generations or help families better understand and manage any conditions from which they are already suffering. Paradoxically, some biobanks are trying to eliminate their users' need to find their biological parents in order to learn about their medical history: for example, the Californian company 23andMe (which also provides DNA ancestry tests) analyzes the genetic and medical data of thousands of its users, generating automated reports about their predispositions to certain hereditary conditions (Pálsson 2012). Jón had his DNA tested by scientists at deCODE, but the company's probabilistic reports (limited by not having David's DNA or medical history) did not give him the answers he was looking for. Thus, finding David's family through an international genetic-genealogical service seemed to Jón to represent a new opportunity to recover this lost heritage.

On the trail of lost parents

Our genealogical work with Jón began in June 2016. Our first step was to enter David's information into Ancestry.com, which is currently the company with the largest collection of online genealogical archives in the world. Even with the few details that Jón had about his father (his family name—Rossi, his date and place of birth, the fact that his parents were Italians who had emigrated to the United States), our search immediately turned up several documents, including a death certificate, which reported that David had died in 1967, at the age of 44.

This was not a surprise for Jón, since if his father had still been alive, he would have been over 90. Jón decided to refocus the search to look for any potential brothers, sisters, or cousins who might be able to tell him more about his father. He also wanted to know the cause of David's apparently premature death. We decided to hire a professional genealogist from Ancestry.com to analyze the documentary traces, and we ordered a DNA test from AncestryDNA (a subsidiary of Ancestry.com) to try to locate any living relatives.

The test results came back first. The "ethnic mix" analysis reported 31% "Italian" ancestry, which Jón welcomed as a small validation of what Anna had told him about his father's family (Illustration 2). The portal also gave him access to a long list of "DNA matches" generated from the database of other AncestryDNA users, with kinship relationships calculated based on the number and length of genomic segments shared between each pair of users (Illustration 3). According to this algorithm, Jón's closest relatives in the database were "second or third cousins." Jón sent them a message, in case one of them might be able to provide him with relevant information.

The report from the Ancestry.com genealogist provided some more specific details. It revealed the names, addresses, emails, and telephone numbers of three people who seemed to be David's sons (Thomas, Antony, and Charlie), along with other people with the surname Rossi whose relationships with David were less clear. We looked for these different family members on social media, where we found profiles that seemed to match the people listed in the report. There was even a photo album on Facebook where several of the names appeared together: it seemed to be a big family reunion. These visual clues appeared to confirm the authenticity of the report, but they also revealed some errors: for example, Charlie, who had been identified by the genealogist as David's youngest son, is in fact a woman.

Jón decided to write a letter, accompanied by a photo album of his family, that he would send by email to the addresses provided by the genealogist. The letter was full of information to prove his identity: the results of his DNA test, his birth certificate, and the results of his genealogical research, which had produced what he described as "a family tree with two half-brothers and a half-sister, and a whole group of relatives, living and dead." Jón also included a copy of the old photograph of David in Iceland. He took his time with the letter and sent it just before Christmas. The letter was titled: "My story. To my family in the United States."

However, when he looked at his inbox after Christmas, Jón saw that the messages had not been delivered; none of the email addresses worked. We then

Primarily located in: **Italy, Greece**

Also found in: **France, Switzerland, Portugal, Spain, Serbia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Austria, Croatia, Bosnia, Romania, Turkey, Slovenia, Algeria, Tunisia, Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo**

Located in the south of Europe, against the Mediterranean Sea, this region gave rise to some of the most iconic and powerful cultures the Western world has known. The Greeks were first, with their pantheon of gods, legendary heroes, philosophers and artists. They subsequently influenced the Romans, whose vast empire spread its ideas and language across Europe.

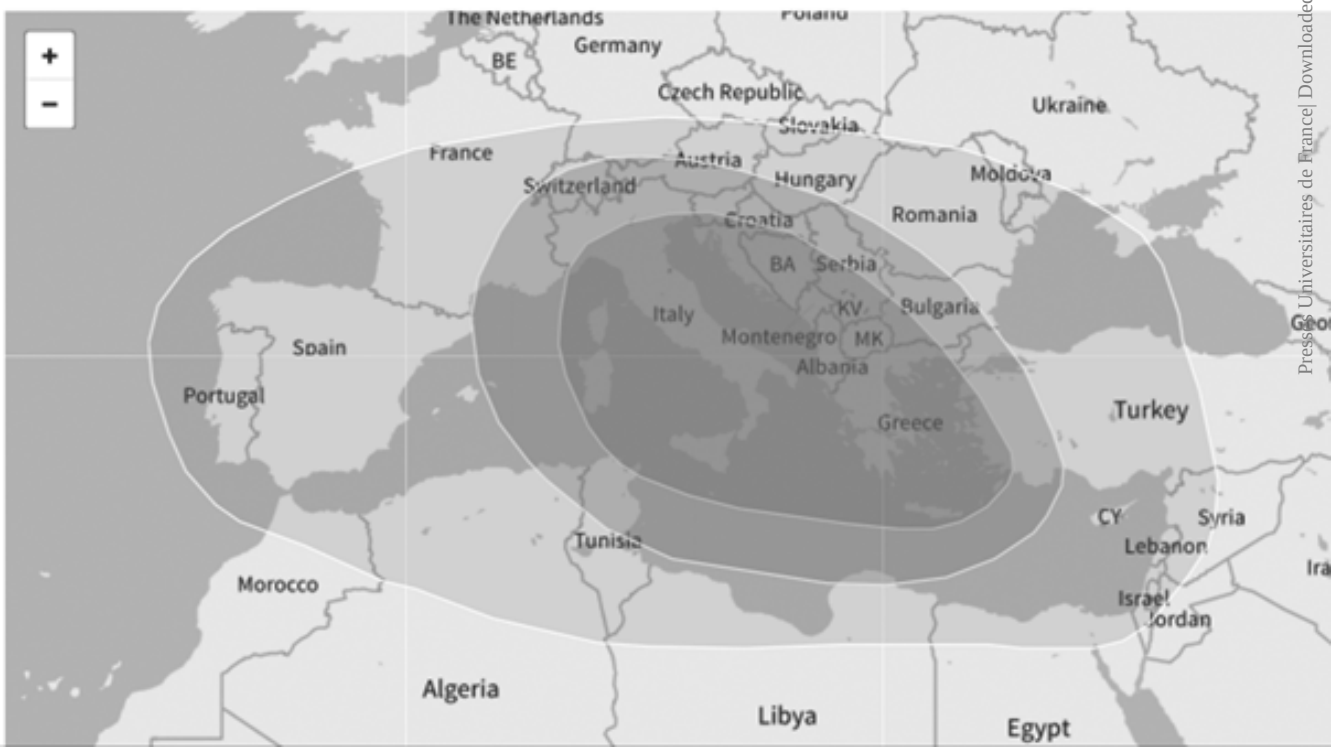

Illustration 2 – Excerpt of the results of Jón's AncestryDNA "ethnic mix." (source: Abel and Pálsson)

tried calling the different telephone numbers, and the first person we were able to speak with was Thomas, David's eldest son, who promised to call us back another day. When we called Antony and Charlie's number, we were able to speak with a woman who asked us not to call again because the family was going through a difficult time. In the meantime, Jón decided to send his letter by post and via Facebook to Thomas, Antony, and Charlie, but he received no response.

In March, we decided to try one last time to contact Thomas, Antony, and Charlie. We reached Thomas by phone, and he explained that he had meant to call us back, but that he had recently received some bad news and did not feel up to talking to us for the time being. We were able to have a somewhat longer conversation with Charlie. It turned out that she was actually Antony's wife, and she apologized for having hung up on us the last time. She did, however, question Jón's motives: What did he want? Why was he only now trying to get in touch with them? Despite her doubts, she agreed to have Jón call them the following weekend to speak with Antony.

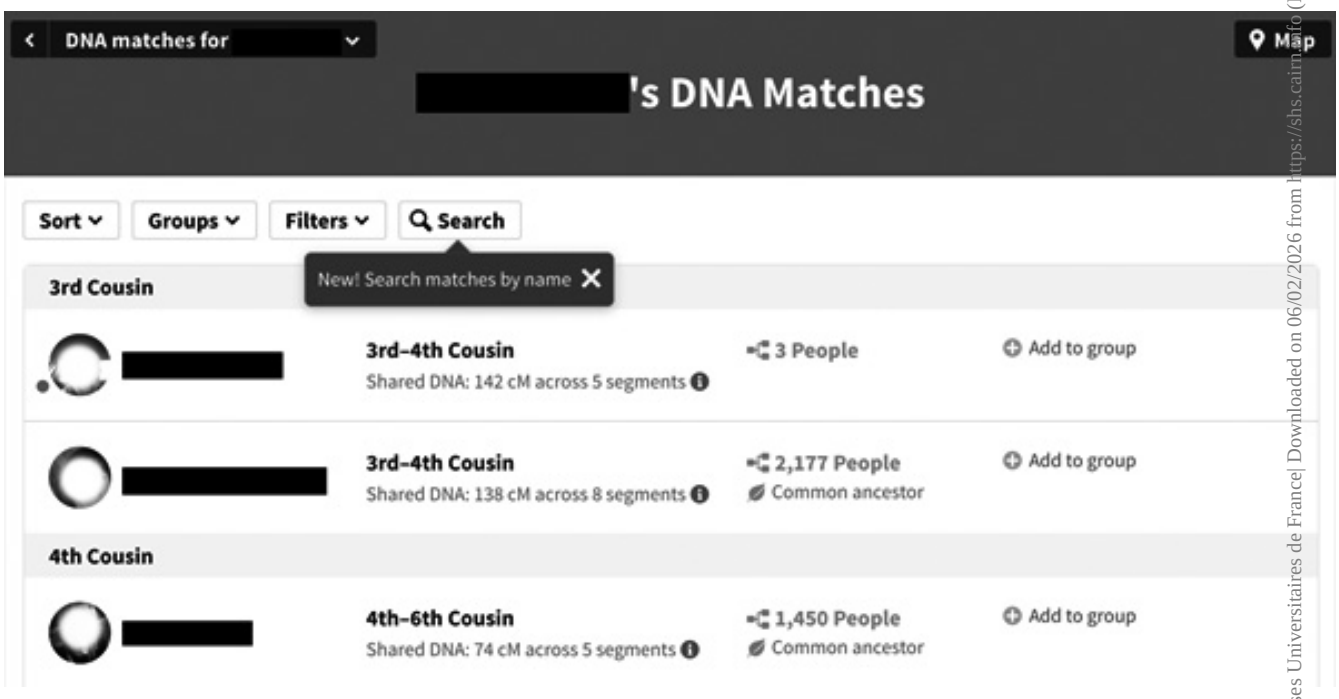

Illustration 3 – Example results from AncestryDNA's "DNA matches" calculator.
(source: Abel and Pálsson)

Initially, Jón seemed encouraged by this progress, but later that evening he developed a fever. On Saturday, just before the scheduled call, Jón wrote to us to say that he had lost his drive: after that weekend, he wanted to abandon the investigation. Later, we reached Antony by phone. He had seen the letter and the photographs that Jón had sent but said that he did not see any family resemblance. Nevertheless, he agreed to give Jón the final details he was looking for: his father's cause of death and confirmation that neither Antony nor Thomas had had any knowledge of their half-brother's existence before receiving his letter. Antony did not have any questions of his own for Jón. After the call ended, we decided that our investigation was finished.

Recognizing one's own and issues of reciprocity

For Cannell (2011) and Edwards (2018), the idea of reciprocity lies at the heart of genealogical practices, which they understand as a way of caring for the dead and of maintaining an emotional connection with them. The stakes of this reciprocal relationship become much higher, however, when these investigations lead to meetings between living relatives. While the users of the IRDB benefit from a sense of collective identity that strengthens their demands for recognition, and, paradoxically, from a genealogical distance that implies a rather reduced level of obligation toward their Icelandic relatives, the fraternal relationship that Jón was looking for with David's other sons seemed to be laden with consequences. As Edwards observes, "not all living kin are suitable family material" (Edwards 2018, 732). But how can we decide which connections should be forged and maintained, and which should be broken and abandoned? How, in other words, do we recognize someone as one of our own?

Stories of reunions between biological relatives who have never met often emphasize shared characteristics—from physical traits to an idiosyncratic sense of humor—that supposedly act as proof of an intimate identity relationship between subjects, implying a shared genetic heritage (Bonniol and Gleize 1994, 5). However, as Bernard Vernier (1994) notes, not all societies attribute family resemblances to strictly genetic mechanisms of heredity. On the contrary, observations of resemblances and differences within a family are often seen as signs of "natural" affinities or distances between one or the other parent and their children.

In Jón's case, the fact that his American relatives saw no "family" resemblance with him seemed to call into question the very existence of such an affiliation, despite all of the proof collected and presented in his letter guaranteeing his identity.

Sometimes, other forms of knowledge, such as feelings or intuition, are given equal, if not greater weight than visible traits when confirming a hereditary relationship. In a recent case reported in the newspaper *Fréttablaðið*, an Icelandic woman, Guðrún, who had been adopted as a baby, discovered that she had been part of a US program to "repatriate" Native American children. With help from her nephew, Guðrún was able to identify her native tribe and invited Native American genealogist Karen Vigneault to come to meet her in Iceland. When they met, Vigneault said that Guðrún looked like a Native American to her, however:

> A person's roots don't just show up in their appearance, they influence their emotions, how they feel, what they do. I see that a lot of what Guðrún does reflects the spirit of her people, she relies a great deal on her inner strength, for example. But she won't know what that means unless she gets to know her people. Telling her about her tribe is one thing, but experiencing it for herself is another. The next step is for her to go to meet people from the Otoe tribe. (Guðbrandsdóttir 2018, 28)

The opportunity never presented itself for Jón to meet David's family. On the contrary, attempts at contact seemed to stir up deep feelings of unease on both sides. In the end, the cumulative stress of his attempts to contact his family and the increasing possibility of total rejection drove Jón to physical and mental exhaustion. In fact, the only person who responded enthusiastically to Jón's messages was a "genetic cousin" he found on AncestryDNA: an American with Sicilian roots who had found surnames in common with Jón in his own family tree. As Janet Carsten observes, for those searching for their biological relatives the most promising kinship connections are sometimes those between cousins, which invoke both "the obligations of kinship and the choice of friendship" (Carsten 2004, 142; see also Sagnes 1998). The feeling of "destiny" that sometimes surrounds meetings between biological relatives is thus conditioned by the possibility of defining the boundaries of these relationships and the mutual obligations they imply.

Jón's case also highlights the importance of the continuity of memory and of family stories in laying the groundwork for mutual recognition between lost relatives. Although the Ancestry.com genealogical machine served as a guide for our research, even with the help of an expert genealogist this system produced false leads (for example, mistaking Charlie's sex and her relationship with David's family). The information it provided was also insufficient when it came to answering Jón's burning questions: What kind of person was his father? Why did his parents separate? Did David's family know of his existence? For their part, David's sons seemed not to know that such an unresolved mystery existed in their family. For them, the man Jón was looking for was almost unknown, having died when they were children, making Jón less of a "long-lost brother" and more of a stranger whose sudden appearance risked overturning their understanding of their family history.

In this sense, Edwards is right when she says that the pedigree created by these machines is only the "skeleton on which the detail—the flesh—is layered" (Edwards 2018, 730); without the necessary context, the relationships it establishes have no meaning. Putting flesh on the bones of ancestral relationships—and thereby reviving relationships between living relatives—is part of the work done by Icelandic Roots. We should recall, for example, the talk that Sunna Furstenau regularly gave on "The Love of Iceland in North America," which elicited such strong emotions and sympathy among its Icelandic audiences toward the descendants of the *Vesturfarar*. In fact, during our conversation in 2017, Sunna offered to contact David's family on Jón's behalf to try to convince them that his search was legitimate. She would put his case in the context of the growing number of Icelanders descended from American soldiers that are now trying to retrace their origins.

In the end, Jón declined this offer. The impact of the rejection he had felt from David's family was particularly strong, discouraging him from contacting them again. This rejection also brought up other versions of his family history that he had previously discredited—for example, Anna's claim that David was a "drunk", something Jón had never wanted to believe. What would he do if his father wasn't the man he thought he was?

According to Janet Carsten, adopted children who seek out their biological family do not always expect that their search will have a cathartic ending. Rather, "reunions enable adoptees to activate a sense that they are choosing their kin for themselves" (Carsten 2000, 698). For Jón, the possibility of cultivating a

connection with David and his sons was already limited by the choices made by his parents throughout their lives, including Anna's decision to burn their letters, destroying the last personal traces of their relationship. Fenella Cannell has observed that the idea of "serendipity" is sometimes used by genealogists to explain the appearance of key information at opportune moments, as if their ancestors wanted to reward their search by sending them a "gift of kinship" for the future (Cannell 2011, 473). Conversely, ancestors who try to obscure or destroy this information are rarely thanked. Still, perhaps we should consider that attempts to remove all traces of a kinship relationship may also be legitimate efforts to shape other forms of family. Such efforts may also be a gift to future generations.

■ Conclusion

While the genetic-genealogical industry seems to focus on DNA as the absolute proof of ancestry and of kinship, we have shown in this article that this essentialist discourse obscures the issues of reciprocity and choice that always influence the tracing practices of the users of these services, as well as the body's insufficiency as a locus of identity. The case studies examined above illustrate two different kinds of search for identity undertaken by these users. Our discussion has highlighted the various "biomarkers" used to uncover "blood" connections in these searches, as well as the additional elements required to activate these relationships and to convert strangers into family.

What sets the Icelandic Roots project apart from other collective "root-seeking" efforts is its creation of a genealogical machine by citizens, by individuals, designed to connect Icelandic descendants to an extended national family tree, embodied by the Book of Icelanders. These two databases include several kinds of biomarkers, the most common of which are not necessarily DNA data, but rather names, dates of birth and of death, and kinship details. Following these traces sometimes requires additional expertise in order to identify false leads that may arise from name changes, administrative errors, etc. Interactions between scientists and companies, genealogical experts and citizens, help to develop and fine-tune these genealogical machines, allowing them to make relationships between subjects visible. Such ties, however, must be revitalized through cultural exchanges and family reunions between Icelanders and Icelandic descendants. Despite the conviction of some of these descendants that they are destined to reconnect with a bloodline and an original soil, the decision to "return" also involves a *choice* to revive this ancestry. Furthermore, if the feeling of belonging to a "big Icelandic family" appears especially strong among some IRDB users (thanks to the wealth of information and cultural traits passed down within their own families and communities), the tracing efforts of Icelandic Roots volunteers may also be understood as a kind of collective "kinship work" (Carsten 2000), intended to extend this possibility of choice to families that do not have an uninterrupted genealogical memory.

Our second case examined the experience of adopted children who, rather than trying to connect with a distant homeland, are trying to recover genealogically close but unknown relatives. Unlike the rich cultural memories that guide the collective research efforts of Icelandic descendants, in Jón's case, the desire to retrace his ancestry was inspired by an awareness of silences and lacunae within his family, and by a chronic disorder that he interpreted as a bodily sign of repressed unease linked to the absence of a parent. The family tree that we reconstructed using Ancestry.com's genealogical databases and genetic kinship estimates was supposed to confirm the "blood" connections between Jón and his father's family. In the end, however, it proved to be more of a skeleton, lacking the flesh of shared experiences and memories that could have given meaning to such a relationship.

Thus, the current desire to "discover" the past and to bring to light "lost" biological relationships raises questions about subjects' obligations toward supposed relatives that contact them based on information found using genealogical machines. By their very nature, these technologies are insensitive, designed only to make kinship relationships transparent by reducing them to their genetic component. This mechanical detection process does not, however, account for more subjective factors that shape the social existence of these complex human relationships: for example, the possibility that subjects (both contemporary and historical) can choose the members of their family, or forge kinship ties through determined work and choice, rather than on the basis of "blood." What about the agency of the dead to keep the secrets of the past, or to avoid being posthumously included in family relationships against their will? Although genealogical companies tend to highlight the cathartic aspect of reunions between biological relatives and of the

uncovering of family secrets, these discoveries can sometimes be disturbing, or indecipherable in the absence of contextual information to "put flesh on the bones" of the pedigree. In this sense, the "authentic" identity that genetic-genealogical companies offer their clients is not based on the uncovering of their biogeographical origins or their genetic matches, but on a feeling of mutual recognition and on a reciprocal commitment, which are not guaranteed by the mere "biological facts" of ancestry.

Notes

1. The number of self-described Icelandic descendants in Brazil is much smaller, but it is beginning to grow thanks to the efforts of the Iceland Brazil Association (AISBRA), founded in 1996 (see Eyþórsdóttir and Loftsdóttir 2016).

2. See the INLNA and INL websites: http://inlofna.org/about and http://www.inl.is/um-felagid/ (consulted March 27, 2019).

3. The details in this section are based on transcripts of interviews and correspondence carried out by Sarah Abel in March 2017.

4. The program is named after Snorri Þorfinnson Karlsefni, the son of the explorers Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir and Þorfinnur Karlsefni. Born in Vinland in the early eleventh century, he is considered the first Icelander "native" to North America.

5. See, for example: "Vissi ekki að þetta hefði verið faðir minn [I didn't know he was my father]," *RÚV*, April 14, 2017, http://www.ruv.is/frett/vissi-ekki-ad-thetta-hefdi-verid-fadir-minn (consulted February 25, 2019).

6. We have used pseudonyms throughout this article to protect the anonymity of Jón and his family.

7. In 1996, after debates in parliament and in society in general, the Icelandic government passed a new law, specifying that "all persons must identify themselves by the name of their father or their mother [...]. Individuals also have the right to identify themselves by the names of both parents" (Alþingi law 45, article 8).

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RÉSUMÉ

Dépister l'ancestralité : machines et techniques généalogiques dans la reconstruction des histoires de famille

Les vingt dernières années ont vu émerger des « machines généalogiques » qui promettent de révolutionner les recherches sur l'histoire familiale. Cet article examine les pratiques de traçage qui s'articulent autour de ces technologies, et leur impact sur le façonnement des concepts actuels de parenté, en s'appuyant sur deux études de cas. L'une se réfère aux efforts déployés par les descendants d'Islandais en Amérique du Nord en vue de s'insérer à nouveau dans l'arbre généalo- gique national, et l'autre suit les tentatives d'un Islandais afin de rétablir le lien avec le père qu'il n'a jamais connu.

Mots clés : Parenté. Tests ADN. Généalogie. Islande. Ancestralité.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Ahnennachforschung
Maschinen und genealogische Techniken bei der Rekonstruktion von Familiengeschichten

In den letzten zwanzig Jahren sind „Ahnenforschungsmaschinen" entstanden, die versprechen, die Forschung zur Familiengeschichte zu revolutionieren. Dieser Artikel untersucht anhand von zwei Fallstudien die Nachforschungspraktiken rund um diese Technologien und ihre Auswirkungen auf die Gestaltung aktueller Verwandtschaftskonzepte. Die erste Fallstudie bezieht sich auf die Bemühungen von Nachkommen von Isländern in Nordamerika, die versuchen, ihren nationalen Stammbaum wieder für sich einzunehmen. Die zweite Fallstudie verfolgt die Versuche eines Isländers, wieder eine Verbindung zu einem Vater herzustellen, den er nie kennengerlernt hat.

Schlagwörter: Verwandtschaft. DNA-Tests. Genealogie. Island. Abstammung.

RESUMEN

Detectar la ancestralidad : máquinas y técnicas genealógicas en la reconstrucción de las historias de familia

En los últimos veinte años han aparecido « máquinas genealógicas » que prometen revolucionar las investigaciones sobre la historia familiar. Este artículo examina las prácticas de rastreo que se articulan en torno a estas tecnologías, y su impacto en la configuración de los actuales conceptos de parentesco a partir de dos estudios. Una se refiere a los esfuerzos realizados por los descendientes de islandeses en América del Norte para volver a insertarse en el árbol genealógico nacional y el otro sigue los intentos de un islandés para restablecer el vínculo con el padre que nunca conoció.

Palabras clave : Parentesco. Test ADN. Genealogía. Islandia. Ancestralidad.