

ANCESTORS, AVOTAYNU, ROOTS:  
AN INQUIRY INTO AMERICAN GENEALOGY DISCOURSE

BY

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## **Abstract**

The monograph is an inquiry into the genealogical assumption, the cultural notion that “who you are” is tied to who your ancestors were and that genealogy and family history will provide knowledge of that bond. The assumption is problematized by an examination of American genealogy discourse during two broad periods of heightened interest in ancestry: from the 1890s through 1930s and from the late 1960s through the present. The material is organized into six case studies of genealogy discourse, which are interpreted through textual and historical analysis. When the various formulations of the assumption uncovered in the case studies are placed side-by-side, the genealogical assumption is “opened-up” and its surface essentialism is brought into question as differing interpretations are exposed. The study concludes that the genealogical assumption is neither a completely satisfactory nor unsatisfactory way to articulate the consequences of social bonds between a person and his or her ancestors.

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## Introduction

“What made America? What makes us?” These are the questions a February 2010 PBS series take up. In *Faces of America*, hosted by Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., traditional genealogy tools and genetic testing are used to explore the family histories of twelve “renowned” Americans, from comedian Steven Colbert and actress Meryl Streep to poet Elizabeth Alexander and journalist Malcolm Gladwell. Gates reveals information about the arrival of guests’ ancestors in the United States and traces their distant ancestry through documents, charts, and DNA evidence. According to the series preview, the guests’ family histories explain who they are as individuals and who we are as a nation.<sup>1</sup> A similar idea appears to be at work in a completely different type of text, a recent Ancestry.com advertisement: “Your great-grandfather was a fire-eater in the circus. No wonder you love spicy food.” Below photos of a fire-eating circus entertainer and a census record listing occupation as “performer,” copy attempts to lure the viewer to Ancestry.com, one of the fastest growing and most popular websites for researching family history. “You’ve inherited a lot from your family,” the text reads. “Your natural ability to juggle. Your appreciation for the performing arts. Perhaps you owe it all to your ancestors. Want proof? Go to Ancestry.com, the world’s largest online collection of family history information.”<sup>2</sup> Both examples, the PBS series description and the Ancestry.com advertisement, convey the message – not much different from the one given to me by my grandmother, herself an avid genealogist – that knowledge of who your ancestors are, of where they came from, is also knowledge about yourself, about where you fit and what makes you you. Genealogy and family history, they suggest,

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<sup>1</sup> “Faces of America,” PBS, < <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/facesofamerica/> > (accessed June 2010).

<sup>2</sup> “Ancestry.com” advertisement, *Ancestry*, January / February 2007, 68.

provide such knowledge. The idea at work in the above examples obviously has some currency in contemporary American culture.

Genealogy and other forms of family history research are, without a doubt, widely practiced and increasingly popular activities in the United States. A 2000 Maritz Research poll found that 60% of Americans surveyed expressed at least some interest in learning about their family history, an increase when compared to their similar 1995 poll that showed 45% of those asked were at least somewhat interested in genealogy. Of that 60%, roughly half had taken the additional step of creating a family tree.<sup>3</sup> A 2005 Marketing Strategies Inc. poll indicated that 73% of Americans express some interest in researching their family history, representing a 50% increase from a similar poll conducted in 1995.<sup>4</sup> Ancestry.com reportedly has “800,000 paying subscribers and 14 million registered users” as of 2007, and FamilySearch.org, the online site for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ Family History Library, receives roughly fifty thousand visitors daily.<sup>5</sup> Interest in genealogy and family history spans across racial and ethnic groups in the United States, as evidenced by journals devoted to African American, Jewish, Latino, and Native American ancestry.<sup>6</sup> And genealogy and family history hold enough audience appeal to be the subject of a spring 2010 primetime television series, NBC’s *Who Do You Think You Are?*

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<sup>3</sup> “Sixty Percent of American Intrigued by Their Family Roots,” Maritz Research Incorporated, May 2000, <<http://maritzresearch.co.uk/release.asp?rc=195&p=2&T=P>> (accessed September 2008).

<sup>4</sup> John Simons, “Tracing African roots through DNA,” *Fortune*, 19 February 2007, 37-38.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen Rosen, “Latest Genealogy Tools Create a Need to Know,” *New York Times*, 18 August 2007; “Tracing your own family roots,” MSNBC, 29 August 2008, <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26455893/>> (accessed September 2008).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society Journal*, *Avotaynu: The International Journal of Jewish Genealogy*, *Nuestras Raíces*, and *The Goingsnake Messenger*.

A survey of contemporary American genealogy and family history discourse reveals a repeated theme: that who a person is – in terms of “authentic self,” “essence,” membership in a racial, ethnic, religious, or national group, etc. – is somehow tied to who a person’s ancestors are and where those ancestors were from and that genealogy and family history provide a method for attaining such knowledge.<sup>7</sup> A few other recent variations on this theme include:

Filmmaker Pierre Sauvage in Barbara Kessel’s *Suddenly Jewish*: “When you erase your heritage, you rob your children of self-knowledge. Heritage is self-knowledge . . . The beliefs of your ancestors are part of you. They shaped you. To not know what shaped you is to be weakened.”<sup>8</sup>

Bliss Broyard, describing the genealogists at work in the New Orleans Public Library in her memoir and family history, *One Drop*: “Always they are searching for a name . . . When they find these names, they can begin to lay claim to history. They tell themselves a story. My family has been in this city for over two hundred years . . . We took part in

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<sup>7</sup> Julia Watson, “Ordering the Family: Genealogy as Autobiographical Pedigree,” in *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 297. Julia Watson made a similar observation. Genealogy, noted Watson, is based on a categorical assumption: “Humans are defined by who and where we are ‘from’ – in terms such as stock, blood, class, race.” Through an analysis of two “how-to” guides, Watson argued that the practice of genealogy works to suppress autobiographical sources of family history. Her use of textual analysis as a method of understanding genealogy as a cultural practice was one inspiration for this project. To be clear, I am not suggesting this “genealogical assumption” is the only theme at work in genealogy and family history discourse. Others are readily apparent, for example one could detect a theme of correct genealogical methodology and information management or genealogy as a social networking hobby.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Sauvage in Barbara Kessel, *Suddenly Jewish: Jews Raised as Gentiles Discover Their Jewish Roots* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2000), 51.



shaping this time, this place, this world. We mattered. We will not be forgotten . . . I envied these people.”<sup>9</sup>

Oprah Winfrey in Henry Louis Gates’ *Finding Oprah’s Roots*: “Knowing your family history is knowing your worth – your whole worth. And I don’t mean your monetary value. It’s about everything that everybody gave up for you . . . It lets you know that you have been paid for.”<sup>10</sup>

Evident in these three examples is the idea that ancestral knowledge, established through genealogy and family history, is significant for making sense of oneself and others. I call this the *genealogical assumption*. This assumption, at work in the cultural discourse on ancestry, genealogy, and family history, suggests that through the method of genealogy research, i.e. research into the lives of past and living others identified as one’s ancestors, something about the persons to whom the genealogy refers – their inherent character, their identity, their place or membership in a social group or groups – will be revealed, produced or constructed, made visible. What might this mean, and how might it work? What sorts of worlds does it envision? What actions follow from it? A genealogy is a concrete representation of how living and past others are oriented in relation to one another, taking the form of pedigree charts, narrative histories, family trees, etc. In the context of the genealogical assumption, is a genealogy considered an objective representation of ancestral knowledge, revealing a previously hidden and fixed

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<sup>9</sup> Bliss Broyard, *One Drop: My Father’s Hidden Life – A Story of Race and Family Secrets* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), 89.

<sup>10</sup> Oprah Winfrey in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Finding Oprah’s Roots, Finding Your Own* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2007), 27.

“truth”? Or might a genealogy also be considered a constructed representation, an object which conjures up a set of relationships rather than making visible natural and existing relationships? How are representations of ancestral knowledge interpreted in different historical and cultural contexts? The genealogical assumption holds that ancestral knowledge is significant for making sense of a person, but does the reason for the significance change over time and circumstances? In other words, is there a single thing that the ancestral knowledge produced through genealogy and family history is “good for” or does the ancestral knowledge represented in a genealogy function in multiple ways and serve multiple purposes? Has the genealogical assumption been talked or written about differently in American culture over time? And if so, what do these various interpretations indicate about the genealogical assumption and American culture in general?

### **Questions about the Social Bond**

There are two aspects to the genealogical assumption. First, the genealogical assumption postulates a constitutive social bond between a person and living and past others recognized as ancestors: “who you are” is connected to who your ancestors are. And second, genealogy makes the social bond known. What is the nature of this social bond? Is it concrete or imagined, or both? The rhetoric associated with the genealogical assumption calls upon ideas about family, relatives, parents and offspring, and kinship, things traditionally thought of as unchanging states of being. A person is a relative or not a relative, right? Unlike other forms of association – a school class cohort, employment, union membership, state or national citizenship, etc. – which can be changed, severed, or re-ordered, familial associations and kin relationships are often regarded as permanent

and therefore generally considered primary, meaning they are more significant and consequential than other social bonds.

The genealogical assumption references social bonds among relatives – as opposed to, for example, the social bonds among friends or co-workers. Perhaps an ideal point of entry for thinking about the nature of the social bond postulated by the genealogical assumption and for addressing some of the questions raised above is a consideration of kinship, i.e. who counts as family and is therefore significant, according to the genealogical assumption, for understanding oneself and others.

According to the hegemonic rules of American kinship, a relative is someone related to you by “blood” or by marriage. In his 1968 study of American kinship, anthropologist David M. Schneider argued that relatives in the American context are culturally defined as persons related through shared biogenetic substance or through a legal agreement, i.e. marriage, though the term relatives is sometimes restricted to just “blood” relatives.<sup>11</sup> In the context of American kinship, the “blood” in the “blood” relationship is thought of in “concrete, biogenetic terms,” and the relationship is established through sexual intercourse resulting in procreation. The “blood” in the relationship, the biogenetic substance, *symbolizes* a shared material possession capable of being “subdivided with each reproductive step away from a given ancestor.”<sup>12</sup>

Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, speaking about “Euro-American kinship” in general,

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<sup>11</sup> David M. Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 23-25. David M. Schneider’s study of American kinship went beyond previous anthropologists in describing kinship not only in terms of structure and functioning but also addressing it as a symbolic system. This makes him a transitional figure in the history of the anthropological concept of kinship. For the significance of Schneider’s work to the anthropological study of kinship see Janet Carsten, *After Kinship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 18.

<sup>12</sup> David M. Schneider, *American Kinship*, 23-25.

remarked that kinship concerns connections “between bodies themselves,” unlike other modes of social connection that lie “outside the body”; for example, though the social relationships that constitute a family may dissolve in divorce or be re-arranged in new marriages, kinship is thought to remain unchanged, interminable – the exact opposite of many forms of modern association, e.g. the factory assembly line, the Lion’s Club.<sup>13</sup> The American kinship scheme also includes a set of terms which modify or qualify a “blood” relationship. Distance, for example, is a measure of the lesser “degree to which” biogenetic substance is thought to be shared.<sup>14</sup> One can therefore speak of “close relatives,” i.e. those sharing more “blood,” and “distant relatives,” i.e. those sharing less “blood.” Marriage adds yet another layer of distance. Even though shared biogenetic substance is considered a qualification for kinship between persons, according to the traditional and dominant model of American kinship, Schneider noted there is “no clear-cut, absolute boundary” between those who are equally relatives and those who are not.<sup>15</sup>

However, despite its reference to a shared biogenetic substance – blood, genes, etc. – there is nothing “natural” about the American kinship scheme. Schneider’s work was significant in kinship studies because it argued that American kinship rules are cultural rules, not natural ones, and anthropologists have continued to critique the notion that kinship is somehow universally structured the same across all cultures or that kinship even plays a constitutive role in all cultures. Matrilineal and patrilineal societies are perhaps the simplest illustrations of the existence of multiple models of kinship

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<sup>13</sup> Marilyn Strathern, “Relatives are Always a Surprise,” in *Kinship, Law and the Unexpected* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 26.

<sup>14</sup> David M. Schneider, *American Kinship*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> David M. Schneider and Calvert B. Cottrell, *The American Kin Universe: A Genealogical Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 12-13.

organization and functioning.<sup>16</sup> The notion that biogenetic substance is universally treated as a permanent material is belied by studies of non-Western cultures. The Tamils of South India, anthropologist Janet Carsten noted, believe that multiple biogenetic substances – blood, milk, sexual fluids – can transform, mix, and recombine in single bodies or through contact with others.<sup>17</sup> Kath Weston, author of *Families We Choose*, argued that kinship formations associated with gay and lesbian families challenge the privilege accorded shared biogenetic substance in the determination of what counts as kinship.<sup>18</sup> And in some social groups, kin are defined not by biology but rather through responsibility and reciprocity, as Carol Stack showed in *All Our Kin*.<sup>19</sup>

These challenges to the dominance of traditional cultural rules of the American kinship scheme throw into question whether the social bond claimed by the genealogical assumption must be conjured up by referencing a shared material substance such as blood or genes. But the genealogical assumption implies that there is *something* shared between parents and offspring, between oneself and one's ancestors spanning across generations, which is why knowledge of ancestry could be considered to inform the understanding of oneself or others. So what is shared between you and your grandfather? Does the social bond between ancestors and descendents have to be symbolized by “blood”?

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<sup>16</sup> Donald Harman Akenson makes use of this point in his critique of the Mormon genealogy project. Akenson argues that not all cultures “keep track of themselves” in the same way, and that the hetero-normative set up, with which Mormons structure their genealogy project – a man and a woman who produce children and operate as a nuclear family – does not work across the board. See Donald Harman Akenson, *Some Family The Mormons and How Humanity Keeps Track of Itself* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Janet Carsten, *After Kinship*, 110.

<sup>18</sup> Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Carol Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

The genealogical assumption implies a temporal chain of action leading from the past to the present that somehow involves distinct concrete persons. The existential facts are that relatives are not the same entities but rather are or were distinct, separate, concrete persons. Strathern counted among the first facts of kinship the recognition that each child is an individual, unique and different from his or her parents, and therefore each child introduces something new, something novel into the world. Yet there is seemingly a lasting connection between parents and progeny.<sup>20</sup> How are we to make sense of the connection? Why are parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and so forth considered different and special in terms of the significance of their association with us – as opposed to, say colleagues? Is it the length of association between parents and children or among relatives? Or is it lives lived in commitment to the flourishing of one another, i.e. meaning employment that supports a household, physical and emotional nourishment of children, etc.? Rather than producing knowledge of shared “blood,” could genealogy and family history produce knowledge of these other bases for social bonding?

In the genealogical assumption, the bond between a person and his or her ancestors constitutes something about the person, not the ancestors. Schneider argued that in the American kinship scheme, a “blood” relationship is treated as a “relationship of identity,” based on a “belief in common biological constitution.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the “sameness” between child and parent, their bond, is premised on a *belief* that parents and offspring share something biological. But Strathern astutely observed that Schneider’s

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<sup>20</sup> Marilyn Strathern, *After Nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 14, 22; see also Peter Wade, “Hybridity Theory and Kinship Thinking,” *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (September 2005): 608.

<sup>21</sup> David M. Schneider, *American Kinship*, 25.

observation about American kinship, that kin relationships are defined by “whatever the biogenetic relationship” happens to be, “was an observation about knowledge: how we make facts known.”<sup>22</sup> In the American cultural scheme, kinship is made known through knowledge of parentage. Strathern’s observation suggests that *recognition* of a shared “something” – blood or genes, obligations, possessions such as land or homes, etc. – is necessary for a relationship of identity to be operative. Awareness of kin relationships, and therefore the relationship of identity, is “contingent on the natural facts themselves” and “what could be known about them.”<sup>23</sup> But is this entirely the case?

The genealogical assumption seems to suggest that a relationship of identity between a person and her or his ancestors depends upon awareness of their shared bond, but the social bond does not necessarily have to be known for the bond to exist. Reproductive technologies in particular throw on its head the notion that a relationship of identity must be based on shared biogenetic substance. In vitro fertilization, surrogacy, and other reproductive methods that circumvent sexual intercourse, Strathern argued, divorce procreation from reproduction. A common sense understanding of reproduction, said Strathern, holds that reproduction “means to bring into existence something that already exists in another form,” thereby making possible the establishment of a “relationship of identity.” But when procreation is separated from known participants – i.e. who donates the egg and sperm, who mechanically brings them together – is reproduction still the result? “The Euro-American idea of human reproduction” includes this notion of re-creating part of oneself, wrote Strathern. “That part must be known or

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<sup>22</sup> Marilyn Strathern, “Displacing Knowledge: Technology and the Consequences of Kinship,” in *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*, eds. Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayana Rapp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 347.

<sup>23</sup> Marilyn Strathern, “Displacing Knowledge,” 350.

seen in another specific person to be effective.”<sup>24</sup> Strathern suggests that regardless of one’s biological constitution, or even the shaping force of guardians during childhood, a relationship of identity between persons cannot exist without some element of recognition about a shared “something” between them. So how does a person come to recognize a social bond between herself and her ancestors? What counts as evidence of the bond and does this change according to cultural, social, and historical context?

### **Questions about Genealogy**

The genealogical assumption puts genealogy and family history forward as the proper method for making the social bond between oneself and one’s ancestors known. The process of genealogy research gives concrete content to the postulated social bond. Genealogy is, by way of a general working definition, the study of family history through written records. At its most basic level, genealogy is about information collection and management. The process of constructing a genealogy involves abstracting information from multiple and diverse documents and artifacts, e.g. census records, military draft cards, tombstones, etc. The abstracted data is used to construct an argument and make a claim about a person’s relationship to living and past others. In other words, genealogy is a process of knowledge production. Genealogy may involve social networking for the purpose of pursuing or sharing information or gaining support for genealogical activities, but social networking is generally not the driving force behind genealogical work. Genealogical practices are plural, i.e. there are multiple ways of pursuing and documenting family history. Examples include library workshops and field work in local institutions and cemeteries but also include computer software, online services, and DNA

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<sup>24</sup> Marilyn Strathern, “Displacing Knowledge,” 354.



research. Finally, genealogy is manifested in written form, in documents such as pedigree charts, reports, and family publications. It should be clear that, though genealogy makes reference to biology, to relationships between parents and offspring, I view a genealogy as a constructed object. The process of genealogical research produces a material thing, a representation of social relationships – or in the words of cultural geographer Catherine Nash, a “material-semiotic object of knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> In the context of the genealogical assumption, the representation conveys knowledge about a person to whom the genealogy refers.

At issue in regards to the genealogical assumption are the appropriate rules for producing ancestral knowledge and what the knowledge produced through genealogy and family history represents or means. Is a genealogy treated as a fetish by those operating under the genealogical assumption, an object whose authority to define, whose status as objective knowledge, is natural? In other words, is genealogy thought to “reveal” ancestral knowledge rather than “construct” ancestral knowledge, or both? It is perhaps helpful here to make a distinction between family history in general and the particulars of genealogy. While sometimes giving consideration to family history passed through an oral tradition, genealogists tend to privilege written records, which are treated as objective evidence of “natural facts” of parentage. The authority of a genealogy lies in its argument and evidence, while the authority of an oral family history, such as one might hear from an African *griot* – a tribal or clan historian – or one’s grandmother, lies in the speaker, i.e. who the speaker is, what the speaker represents. Genealogy also functions differently than a phenotypic-based ascription, e.g. because someone “looks Native

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<sup>25</sup> Catherine Nash, “Genealogical Identities,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20 (2002): 29.

American” is insufficient to “make a case” about a person’s ancestry. When appropriate evidence is collected and ordered, the genealogist is able to make an argument about kin relationships across generations. It is a map of social relationships, a representation of how one person is oriented toward particular, culturally significant, others. The genealogical assumption holds that genealogy provides evidence for a belief in shared “something” between parents and offspring. It creates a representation of their social bond.

### **Why does the genealogical assumption matter?**

The genealogical assumption, which holds that “who you are” is a function of who your ancestors are or where your ancestors geographically originated, is clearly one significant way of thinking about how a person is situated in social space over time. What role if any might the genealogical assumption play in establishing group membership or assigning social obligations and responsibilities? It is not difficult to envision the genealogical assumption being called upon in determining one’s inclusion or exclusion from various social groups – from smaller associations such as patriotic societies to larger real and imagined collectives such as the nation or a race. It is the genealogical assumption’s suggested claims to the primacy and permanence of a particular social bond and its potential role in creating claims concerning membership or exclusion from social groups – concrete or imagined – that troubles me.

Humanities and social science scholars have spent considerable time de-naturalizing identity, self, etc. and through the process exposed once hidden power relationships and pointed to “cracks” in existing structures of power, thereby challenging the claims of both. Yet essentialist forms of social locating – which reduce persons to

their supposedly permanent and basic essence, sometimes symbolized by “blood,” genes, etc. – remain culturally relevant. For example, a 2007 article by sociologists Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum noted the continued use of the biogenetic kinship model among contemporary Jews as a means of defining their “Jewish-ness” despite the discrediting of race as a biological category by scientists.<sup>26</sup> Henry Louis Gates’ extensive interest in the potential for genetic testing to reveal ancestral origins stands as yet another example of why the genealogical assumption cannot be so quickly dismissed. Gates, a long time scholar of historical African American identity promotes the use of DNA analysis to establish social bonds between Americans of African descent and ethnic groups in present-day Africa based on shared bio-genetic substance.

Despite how tempting it might be for many scholars in the humanities and social sciences who tend to privilege social constructivist interpretations of social categorization and personal and social identity formation, to disregard those who retain hold of the genealogical assumption as a method for thinking about the location of oneself or others in social space is foolish at best and dangerous at worst. For example, blaming obesity entirely upon one’s hereditary inheritance displaces responsibility away from oneself and towards a gene. More consequentially though, could the genealogical assumption be used to justify violence against others, perhaps by employing the rhetoric of “blood and soil” to explain “who’s with us” and “who’s against us?” Considering the popularity of genealogy and family history in the United States, its potential consequences for situating oneself and others in a social environment, and the continued salience of racial, ethnic,

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<sup>26</sup> Shelly Tenenbaum and Lynn Davidman, “It’s in My Genes: Biological Discourse and Essentialist Views of Identity Among Contemporary Jews,” *Sociological Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 435-450.

religious and national membership as markers for exclusion and inclusion, it is necessary to take some position in relation to this existing piece of the American cultural fabric.

What is to be made of the genealogical assumption?

### **Problem and Inquiry**

Surely there is something compelling about the belief that knowledge of self comes through documentary knowledge of one's ancestry, one's roots. Biology and genetics, patterns of concrete human interaction, cultural expectations regarding relationships between parents and offspring, financial inheritance, emotional debts . . . these really are part of the "world out there," material things "people bump" into as they make choices and engage in their physical and social environments. Genetic make-up can affect life-chances. Human procreation still demands a sperm and an egg – if not sexual intercourse. And what about patterns of behavior established during early childhood familial associations that are now lost to memory? French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu refers to a person's "primary habitus" to talk about the social environment in which initial patterns of behavior are established.<sup>27</sup> A "habitus" is the product of deep, material social bonds. In this situation, an investigation of family history, of those individuals who participated in forming one's early patterns of behavior, may contribute to one's personal identity through claims about psychology, cognition, and social interaction rather than claims about "blood" or other biological substances. Both examples – biological / physiological traits established through procreation and the acquisition of social behavioral patterns in early childhood – are cultural models for thinking about what makes you "who you are" in your eyes and those of others. These

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Sage Publications, 1990), 42-45.

examples can certainly be put in contrast to alternative models for conceptualizing the production of self or social identity that do not draw on the language of family and ancestry. But the dichotomy between frameworks which treat self and social identity formation as the result of biology, heredity, genes, etc. and those which rely entirely on social interaction should be reconsidered. Even in the absence of shared “blood,” is there a particular shared “something” – material or not – between oneself and one’s ancestors that crosses generations? And are there consequences for not knowing?

So where does the genealogical assumption fall? Is the genealogical assumption an acceptable way of conceptualizing self or social identity formation? On one hand, the genealogical assumption is potentially troubling, especially when the social bond it postulates is conceptualized as being based on shared “blood” or genes; when thought of in these terms the genealogical assumption resembles pre-modern notions of social categorization, of location in social space, and smacks of essentialism. The continued relevance of the hetero-normative model of kinship – conceptualized as social bonds based on shared “blood” – poses a challenge to, and therefore a problem for, other modes of social orientation, e.g. voluntary associations, reasoned social contract, friendship, etc. The idea that one’s location in society, with its attendant roles and cultural expectations about behavior and treatment, is the function of one’s ancestors and ancestral geographic origin stands in opposition to liberal individualism, which has been the dominant political ideology in the United States, and more radical ideas of social democracy. The genealogical assumption could potentially suggest that social orientation – where we and others envision us “fitting” – is out of our hands, beyond our control and settled. But is this really the case? When examined in historical context, are there “cracks” in

conceptualizations of the genealogical assumption that open the possibility for re-thinking the assumption? Should genealogy and family history premised on the genealogical assumption be thrown out entirely? Is the genealogical assumption ever a satisfactory model for thinking about oneself and others in social space, for getting “grounded” through social bonds?

The present study is an inquiry into historical manifestations of the genealogical assumption.<sup>28</sup> Genealogy and family history discourse in the United States will provide a point of entry for troubling and creating critical distance from the genealogical assumption. The project is not intended to be a history of genealogy practice in the United States. Rather the inquiry seeks to describe and account for particular formations of the genealogical assumption in cultural discourse in historical context by analyzing texts addressing genealogy and family history practice. By placing these various formulations of the genealogical assumption side-by-side, the study will “open up” the genealogical assumption for critique.

Are there elements in American genealogy discourse that disrupt the genealogical assumption? In other words, recognizing the constructed nature of a genealogy – a process of assembling data to make an argument about a social bond – are there moments

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<sup>28</sup> Existing scholarly literature on genealogy does not take up questions related to the genealogical assumption. The original review of literature completed for the dissertation prospectus revealed no book-length academic works on the general topic of genealogy. Since then, I have learned of a number of projects at various stages of completion that address the history of genealogy practice in the United States; these include two broad treatments by historians Francesca C. Morgan and François Weil and another history by Karen Wulf focusing on the transnational aspects of British American genealogy and its connection to political culture, tentatively titled: “Lineage: The Politics and Poetics of Genealogy in British America, 1680-1820.” The initial review of literature also noted other categories of academic scholarship addressing genealogy: the relationship between genealogists and archivists and archival institutions; the relationship between genealogy and the field of social history; studies on the motivations of genealogists and family historians. This dissertation seeks to contribute to the emerging literature on genealogy by examining one animating assumption behind genealogy and family history research.

in American genealogy discourse that reveal that constructed-ness and therefore challenge the constitutive pull at work in the genealogical assumption, i.e. that ancestral knowledge will tell you “who you are”?

Research indicated two broad moments of heightened interest in ancestry, family history, and genealogy in United States history – roughly from the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century and from the late 1960s through the present – which serve to organize the presentation of material in the body of the monograph. Though genealogy only recently became a popular leisure time activity enjoyed by many Americans, it figured significantly in lives of middle and upper class whites during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly in patriotic heredity-based societies, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and those involved in the American eugenics movement who sought to prevent “unfit” persons from reproducing. In what follows, a series of historical cases of genealogy discourse are examined to determine how the genealogical assumption has been articulated in specific cultural contexts. Discourse is treated in this inquiry in its mundane sense, referring simply to written or spoken communication. In each case, discourse on the genealogical assumption and genealogy practice is investigated through a variety of texts, including genealogical magazines and journals, guidebooks, popular media reports, and representations of ancestral knowledge. It is difficult to capture all of the voices which define the parameters of the discourse; the present study relies primarily on the normative component of genealogy discourse rather than oppositional voices. The cultural discourse and representations of ancestral knowledge are situated in historical context using secondary literature. The inquiry relies on methods of textual and historical

analysis to draw comparisons and contrasts between specific cases of genealogy discourse. Through comparing and contrasting various formulations of the genealogical assumption the assumption is made problematic and “cracks” in the essentialist elements of discourse on the genealogical assumption are identified.

The choice of cases was based on two things. First, I sought cases which addressed significant players in the promotion of genealogy and family history in the United States. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, heredity-based patriotic societies and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints shaped popular perceptions of genealogy practice in the United States; collected, organized, and indexed materials; and created a market for genealogy products. Likewise, the surge of interest in genealogy among minority groups in the United States during the 1970s, including African and Jewish Americans, contributed to the promotion of genealogy as a popular leisure-time activity. Second, cases needed to illuminate the genealogical assumption, so I sought cases in which genealogy and family history were not ends in themselves but rather called upon the genealogical assumption to locate a person in concrete and “imagined” social spaces – e.g. the nation, the people, the “fit” or “unfit.”<sup>29</sup> The monograph, however, is not about the individual cases themselves but rather what they might reveal about the genealogical assumption when placed side-by-side.

The monograph is not ethnography and does not attempt to explain individual motivations for undertaking genealogy research. Instead, the inquiry seeks to make sense

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<sup>29</sup> Taking inspiration from Benedict Anderson’s 1983 book *Imagined Communities*, the word “imagined” in this study is not synonymous with “not real” but rather signifies a visualization of existing and consequential social bonds beyond the realm of face-to-face contact. Anderson writes that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity / genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.” Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; repr., New York: Verso, 1996), 6.



of a part of the existing fabric of American cultural discourse, specifically the genealogical assumption behind ancestral knowledge production, to draw some broad conclusions about the genealogical assumption based on the research, and to reflect on its value as a model of conceptualizing social relationships.

## 1.1 Introduction

“A knowledge of our national history is considered essential to fit one to act his part in the mutual association of citizenship,” wrote G.T. Ridlon in the September 1875 inaugural issue of the *Maine Genealogist and Biographer*, but “How few of our young men can tell the names of their great-grandparents!” Ridlon was pleased, however, that family history was finally receiving its due, as “institutions designed for its furtherance,” e.g. genealogical societies and libraries, were growing around the country.<sup>1</sup> According to Ridlon, the value of genealogy and family history lies in the recognition it provides of multi-generational social bonds. “The elements of human nature have not changed,” he wrote; “consequently, as we recognize the obligations we are under to those who have preceded us for preserving for us the meager records of their families, so may we remember that ‘no man liveth to himself’.”<sup>2</sup> The three case studies that follow illustrate how genealogy calls up the constitutive social bond between ancestors and descendants and locates a person in social space.

Genealogy and family history played an increasing role in American cultural discourse following the Civil War. An examination of late nineteenth and early twentieth century American genealogy discourse reveals the following formation of the genealogical assumption: through the process of assembling a genealogy, the “natural facts” of a person’s biological lineage are made visible, making possible various kinds of social categorizations and public claim-making. The three cases of discourse presented in this portion of the monograph – that of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the

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<sup>1</sup> G.T. Ridlon, “Importance of Family History,” 1875; reprinted in *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 13 (October 1912): 182.

<sup>2</sup> G.T. Ridlon, “Importance of Family History,” 1875; reprinted in *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 13 (October 1912): 185.

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and American eugenics leaders and advocates – illustrate how the genealogical assumption is deployed defensively, to locate or assign concrete persons within larger imagined collectivities.

### **Genealogy as a Response to the Industrial Revolution**

What accounts for a heightened cultural interest in ancestral knowledge, and why does that interest take the shape it does? Many American cultural institutions and ideas of the nineteenth century were “oriented toward community life” of an earlier time and were not suited for making sense of the period’s tremendous social and cultural changes.<sup>3</sup> For those whose economic livelihoods were threatened by industrialization and corporatization, such as farmers and laborers, the response was revolt and protest. For others, the older established white, Protestant, social and cultural elites in urban areas, changes brought about by industrialization – urbanization, internal migrations and immigration, etc. – resulted in a sort of malaise, a general uncertainty and sense of threat against their location and power in the social and cultural landscape.

Historian Robert M. Taylor has correctly argued that a turn to ancestral history, genealogy, and family reunions served as a method by which old-stock upper and middle class white Americans sought to solidify their status to themselves and others in American society. His argument is significant because it draws a connection between the anxiety felt by middle and upper class white Protestants and genealogy practice. Taylor pointed to the emergence of not only patriotic heredity-based societies discussed in the next section but also historical and pioneer organizations and family associations as evidence of the increased interest in family and national history; but, wrote Taylor, the

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<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 12.

“novel discernment of pedigrees might have come for naught if it had not occurred within a context of deeply-felt endearment toward the family and an apprehension of present and impending social and family problems.”<sup>4</sup> Through genealogy and family reunions, older family members sought to hold up ancestors as models for behavior to those younger family members seeking to take advantage of industrialization and opportunities in growing American cities and also to reassert the family’s central role in American society. Ultimately, Taylor argued, this tactic of combating perceived social problems was unsuccessful because the “emphasis on individual and familial ethical reform” failed to address the “era’s serious structural questions.”<sup>5</sup> But Taylor’s argument does not fully account for why genealogy and family history could be seen as a bulwark against social and cultural change.

What Taylor does not address in his discussion of late nineteenth century American genealogy is the role played by cultural ideas concerning evolution, race, and heredity in the construction of genealogy discourse and representations of ancestral knowledge. Genealogy and family history discourse intersects with two sets of related ideas: popular and scientific notions dealing broadly with race, species development, and “the nation” and with popular and scientific notions concerning individual heredity, “blood,” and character traits. In genealogy, race and heredity intersect. Genealogy was treated as a method for making visible to others and oneself a social bond based on shared hereditary makeup, which then enabled a person to be categorized, to be included or excluded, in racial hierarchies, lineage groups, and the nation.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Taylor, “Summoning the Wandering Tribes,” *Journal of Social History* 16, no. 2 (Winter 1982): 24.

<sup>5</sup> Robert M. Taylor, “Summoning the Wandering Tribes,” 30.

## Race and the Science of Heredity

Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and its intersection with racial science and the science of heredity forms a necessary component for understanding American genealogy discourse at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859, argued against the fixity of animal species, including human beings, postulating instead that species develop over time through a process of natural selection, i.e. the ability or failure of a species to adapt to changing environmental circumstances. Darwin's theory of evolution was popularized in the United States through the social theories of Englishman Herbert Spencer, whose language of "struggle for existence" and "survival of the fittest" was taken up in cultural spheres outside of the natural sciences, including economics, sociology, and politics in the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>6</sup> In this context, conflict between individuals, between groups, between nations, between races was seen not as evil but rather as "nature's indispensable method of producing superior men, superior nations, and superior races."<sup>7</sup> In Spencer's view, races could be classified in terms of their progress in human evolution, with Europeans furthest in development and Africans and Asians as primitive peoples straggling behind in their evolutionary development. The language of "struggle for existence," however, opened the possibility that the existing social structure was not settled but ever in danger of being overturned; under the logic of Darwinism, racial hierarchies required maintenance.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963), 146-148; see also Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944; repr., New York: Beacon Press, 1992), 34-35 for information regarding Spencer's reception in the United States.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas F. Gossett, *Race*, 145.

Though Darwinism undermined the legitimacy of polygenist thinking, arguing for the seeming biological unity of humanity, the desire to describe, measure, and classify the world's peoples as if they were discrete groups continued unabated.<sup>8</sup> In categorizing varieties of human beings, observers – including both trained and self-styled anthropologists – “posited a linkage between physical type and cultural standing.”<sup>9</sup> Historian Matthew Frye Jacobson noted the basic assumptions underlying racial hierarchies in the wake of Darwin: that development occurred from simple to complex, that development could be measured by human control over nature, and that “primitive” peoples – those considered earlier in their evolutionary development – could provide insight into advanced civilizations, i.e. Anglo-Saxon societies.<sup>10</sup>

Darwinism ultimately called into question long-standing notions about not only the fixity of race but also Anglo-Saxon superiority. Many old-stock Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent held that the “inner vitality” of Anglo-Saxon peoples accounted for the success of self-government in the United States. But in the wake of black emancipation and the rising tide of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, the continued influence of that “inner vitality” – meaning the dominance of Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent – was thought to be under assault. The growing influence of Darwinism in American culture did not help matters. Popular Darwinism, noted historian John Higham, “provoked anxiety” among old-stock Anglo-Saxon Protestants “by denying assurance” that the “biological basis” of that superiority “would endure.”<sup>11</sup> The emerging

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917*, (2000; repr., New York: Hill & Wang, 2001), 144.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, 144.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, 145.

<sup>11</sup> John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nationalism 1860-1925* (1955; repr., New York: Atheneum, 1981), 135.

science of heredity promised to explain the mechanics of evolution, providing old-stock Americans an interpretive framework for making sense of their anxiety and for combating perceived dangers to their social and cultural dominance.

An awareness of heredity was, of course, nothing new in the late nineteenth century. For example, historian Mark H. Haller noted the Judeo-Christian idea that the “iniquities of the fathers were visited on the sons.” Prior to the 1860s and the publication of Darwin’s evolutionary theories, it was common to believe that “feeble-mindedness” or “insanity” derived from “some dark ancestral trait” and that one’s character traits derived directly from one’s ancestors’ “blood” coursing through the veins. The popularization of Darwin’s theory of evolution increased public interest in heredity and led to the reformulation of many ideas in “evolutionary terms.”<sup>12</sup> The major significant deficiency in Darwin’s evolutionary theory, however, was its inability to explain the mechanics by which certain traits were transferred from parent to offspring, i.e. how adaptation actually happened. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Lamarckian notion of inheritance of acquired traits provided such an explanation.

The idea of inheritance of acquired characters held that physical and mental traits developed over a person’s lifetime would be passed onto one’s offspring. The notion derived from Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s behavioral theory of evolution, which postulated that “structural modifications acquired in the lifetime of individual organisms” could be passed on in reproduction.<sup>13</sup> The theory of inheritance of acquired characters held that germ-plasm, what today would be identified as chromosomes, and other body cells were

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<sup>12</sup> Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 22-23.

<sup>13</sup> George W. Stocking, “Lamarckianism in American Social Science, 1890-1915,” in *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 238.

linked, and whatever happened to the body cells impacted germ-plasm.<sup>14</sup> A Lamarckian accounted for the giraffe's long neck, for instance, by arguing that because generations of giraffes have reached up toward trees for leaves, their necks have gotten increasing longer with each passing generation. Under the Lamarckian model of the mechanics of heredity, "social behavior of men" was "potentially a major factor in the overall scheme of human physical evolution."<sup>15</sup>

The implications of inheritance of acquired characters pointed in multiple directions. Historian Donald K. Pickens noted that the idea had both "aristocratic" and "democratic" interpretations. The "aristocratic," conservative interpretation understood inheritance of acquired characters as confirmation of survival of the fittest, that those who were able to adapt or overcome troublesome environmental circumstances were superior to those who failed to thrive in a difficult environment and passed those failings onto their children. Therefore, inheritance of acquired characters could be used to explain Anglo-Saxon superiority. The "democratic" interpretation confirmed the "hereditary value" of "environmental experiences." Inheritance of acquired characters provided theoretical support for social welfare programs and education because it was believed that whatever improved the individual improved the overall species.<sup>16</sup> What is significant about the idea of inheritance of acquired characters was that it bound together those who emphasized heredity and those who privileged environment in explaining human behavior and society; in other words, such a position did not postulate a clean division between biological and cultural explanations of human behavior.

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<sup>14</sup> Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics*, 60-61.

<sup>15</sup> George W. Stocking, "Lamarckianism in American Social Science, 1890-1915," 239.

<sup>16</sup> Donald K. Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), 37-38.



The concept of inheritance of acquired characters dominated American public thought concerning the mechanics of heredity throughout the 1890s, spanning the formative years of the Daughters of the American Revolution and many other patriotic heredity-based societies, discussed below. The idea did, however, receive its first scientific challenges in the 1880s and '90s. German scientist August Weismann postulated that germ plasm developed independent of other body cells. In other words, germ plasm is passed on without change, regardless of life experiences.<sup>17</sup> Weismann's challenge to Lamarckianism opened the door for the acceptance of Mendelian genetics in the early 1900s by both scientists and the general public and opened the debate between those who emphasized the role of heredity in explaining a person's condition and those who emphasized environment. Historian Henry F. May writes, "While most laymen had not thought very hard on the matter, many of them were unconscious Lamarckians," in other words, "they assumed that what one did affected one's heirs." Weismann ultimately turned this logic on its head, making "nonsense of a half-century of sermons about avoiding sin in order to improve the race."<sup>18</sup>

In the late 1850s, Augustinian monk Gregor Mendel began experimenting with sweet peas, cross breeding different types then observing the appearance of certain traits across multiple generations. Mendel's research revealed two key things about heredity. First, heredity was particular. While Weismann took the step of separating hereditary substance from an individual's bodily condition, Mendel argued that traits are individual and multiple, and traits maintain their uniqueness as they are passed from one generation

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<sup>17</sup> Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics* 60-61

<sup>18</sup> Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A study of the first years of our own time* (1959; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 224.

to the next. Second, the components that determined the manifestation of a trait – what we now call “genes” – come in pairs, one determiner from each parent. If the two genes are alike, the trait appears in the offspring; if the two genes are different, then the trait remains hidden. Mendel’s work was rediscovered in the early 1900s by European scientists. William Castle, a Harvard biologist and advocate of the applied “science” of eugenics, introduced Mendel’s theories into American scientific discourse in 1903; by 1905, Mendel’s explanations of the mechanism of heredity had come to dominate over the Lamarckian notion of inheritance of acquired characters, figuring significantly in the American eugenics movement.<sup>19</sup> The concept of heredity, defined by either inheritance of acquired characters or Mendelian genetics, provided justification for the genealogical assumption by offering an explanation of the constitutive element of the social bond between ancestors and descendents.

### **A Brief History of Genealogy in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century**

The three cases of genealogy practice discussed below drew upon existing genealogical methods for the creation of ancestral knowledge, for making visible the social bond between ancestors and descendents and therefore one’s hereditary inheritance. Genealogy, of course, was hardly new at the end of the nineteenth century, but it had not previously been widely practiced outside of antiquarian and legal circles. A careful accounting of lineage has and continues to play a role in the legal transfer of property and assignment of rights to heirs. In the United States during the colonial period and early years of the republic, genealogy held some interest for landed gentry and descendents of British aristocracy who wished to solidify their status by connecting

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<sup>19</sup> Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics*, 61; Donald K. Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives*, 47-49.

themselves to illustrious ancestors as opposed to all their family members. Most colonial Americans, however, had little reason or even the time to pursue genealogical research. The family history research that was done in the colonies followed the model practiced in Great Britain of tracing an illustrious ancestor. For example, the Byrd family of Virginia, which had their genealogy prepared by the College of Heralds in London in 1698, traced their origins back to Charlemagne. For the most part, family history in the United States during the eighteenth century was passed down orally between generations.<sup>20</sup> A number of historians account for the general American aversion to genealogy during the eighteenth and nineteenth century by pointing to the nation's ideological commitment to civic republicanism and democratic egalitarianism. Taylor wrote that early citizens of the republic showed a "distaste for social distinction based on heredity" and were more concerned with one's present achievements and future plans than past events.<sup>21</sup> François Weil stated that early citizens saw an incompatibility between genealogy and a republican ideology that "privileged the common good, equality, and citizens' virtue." For these citizens, genealogy remained associated with "attempts to secure social standing within the British empire" and had no place in a forward-thinking nation.<sup>22</sup>

Key to increasing interest in genealogical research in the United States was the creation of local historical societies in the 1820s and 1830s, a greater attention paid to public record keeping, and a slow change in the popular perception of genealogy initiated

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<sup>20</sup> Christie A. Wood, "Toward the new genealogy: Genealogical research in archives and the Saskatchewan Genealogical Society, 1969-2004" (master's thesis, University of Manitoba, Canada, 2005), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Robert M. Taylor and Ralph S. Crandall, "Historians and Genealogists: An Emerging Community of Interest," in *Generations and Change: Genealogical Perspectives in Social History* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 4-5.

<sup>22</sup> François Weil, "John Farmer and the Making of American Genealogy," *New England Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (September 2007): 409-410.

by the nation's small learned community. Weil pointed to John Farmer of New Hampshire as a leading figure in building a network of individuals committed to "promoting the cause of genealogy and antiquarianism" in the United States. Farmer published *The Genealogical Register of the First Settlers of New England* in 1829, a project addressing not one aristocratic family but rather the histories of many families connected to the settlement and growth of New England.<sup>23</sup> The publication of Farmer's *Genealogical Register* and the network Farmer built in researching the volume, argued Weil, initiated a number of significant changes in the practice of genealogy in the United States, including a new emphasis on scholarship and primary evidence collection over "traditionary report," new efforts at records preservation, and peer review of genealogical work.<sup>24</sup> In 1845, the first American genealogy organization, the New England Genealogical Society, was founded in Boston. The Society launched the first genealogical journal, *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, in 1847. The New England Genealogical Society, noted Weil, "operated as a learned society," evidence of the cultural impact of Farmer and his associates' work: "for by the 1830s and 1840s, genealogy was more frequently associated with erudite rather than aristocratic pursuits."<sup>25</sup>

Prior to the Civil War, genealogy, biography, and local and national history were treated as very similar scholarly activities. The "relation between genealogy and history," noted Taylor, "rarely occasioned comment because the genealogist, biographer,

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<sup>23</sup> François Weil, "John Farmer and the Making of American Genealogy," 420.

<sup>24</sup> François Weil, "John Farmer and the Making of American Genealogy," 425-429.

<sup>25</sup> François Weil, "John Farmer and the Making of American Genealogy," 433.

historian, and antiquarian were one and the same person.”<sup>26</sup> As American universities increased in number in the 1870s, history became an academic rather than just a scholarly enterprise, and the status of academic history rose as those in the field brought their methods into line with other “scientific” disciplines, such as sociology. While historical works had previously followed a literary model, after the Civil War, historians created “scientific monographs.”<sup>27</sup> By the late nineteenth century, noted Taylor, historical writing had split into three “orientations”: local history, which “chronicled the town and the county,” genealogy, which “gave attention to the bare bones of lives,” and “history proper.”<sup>28</sup> Academic historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century viewed genealogy as “elitist and cringed at the fact that at least some of its proponents were active in the anti-immigration movements.”<sup>29</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, genealogy became, as Taylor noted, a popular practice for a particular segment of American society – white, upper and middle class “old-stock” Protestants of Anglo-Saxon descent – supported through a number of institutional structures. Genealogical societies – such as the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, founded in 1869; the Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania, established in 1892; and the National Genealogical Society, formed in 1903 – provided amateur and experienced genealogists a network for finding resources, guidance in methods, and solving research problems. Many of these societies, including the ones

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<sup>26</sup> Robert M. Taylor and Ralph J. Crandall, “Historians and Genealogists: An Emerging Community of Interest,” 15; see also Lester J. Cappon, “Genealogy: Handmaid of History,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (March 1957): 1.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (1968; repr., New York: Random House, 1970), 35-40.

<sup>28</sup> Robert M. Taylor and Ralph J. Crandall, “Historians and Genealogists: An Emerging Community of Interest,” 15.

<sup>29</sup> David L. Greene, “Donald Lines Jacobus, Scholarly Genealogy, and *The American Genealogist*,” *American Genealogist* 72, nos. 3-4 (July / October 1997): 159.

mentioned above, also published their own journals. A segment of the publishing industry specialized in genealogy-related books. Publishers such as Joel Munsell's Sons of Albany, New York and Goodspeed of Chicago printed not only genealogies but also county histories and "how-to" manuals, for example Henry R. Stiles' *A Hand-Book of Practical Suggestions for the Use of Students in Genealogy*, published in 1899.<sup>30</sup> The cases discussed below drew from the existing field of genealogy and family history built over the nineteenth century.

## Discussion

American genealogy was rooted in and continued to circulate in legal and antiquarian discourses. But genealogy also entered discourses about race and heredity, about the nation and immigration, and about social categorization at the end of the nineteenth century, often with consequences for the recognition of social and cultural privileges and obligations, for a cultural sense of racial and national health or degeneration, for concrete belonging and exclusion. What follows are three cases of genealogy discourse during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: that of the Daughters of the American Revolution during their "eligibility crisis" of the early 1890s, modern Mormon genealogy discourse, and discussions concerning the use of genealogy in the American eugenics movements during the early decades of the twentieth century. In each case, the genealogical assumption is formulated primarily in essentialist terms, meaning ancestral knowledge was interpreted in light of existing knowledge about biology-based racial categories. Ancestral knowledge, read through current ideas about

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<sup>30</sup> Henry R. Stiles, *A Hand-Book of Practical Suggestions for the Use of Students in Genealogy* (Albany, NY: Joel Munsell's Sons, 1899). Other handbooks of the period include, William Stowell Mills, *Foundations of Genealogy* (New York: Monograph Publishing Company, 1899) and Frank Allaben, *Concerning Genealogies, Being Suggestions of Value for All Interested in Family History* (New York: Grafton Press, 1904).

heredity, provided the Daughters, Mormons, and eugenicists a means of determining “who you are,” i.e. where you fit in lineage groups and racial hierarchies. Genealogy, in these cases, made visible one’s biological lineage, ancestral knowledge which could then be used to determine one’s place in a racial hierarchy, with corresponding social rights and responsibilities.

## **1.2 Daughters of the American Revolution**

### **Introduction**

At the February 1892 meeting of the Continental Congress – the annual meeting of the Daughters of the American Revolution – the State Regent from Pennsylvania, Julia K. Hogg, brought to the Board of Management a petition calling for a change in the eligibility clause of the constitution of the national Daughters of the American Revolution. The constitution, as it was then written, opened membership to any woman over eighteen years old who could provide evidence of descent from an “ancestor who with unflinching loyalty rendered material aid to the cause of independence as a recognized patriot, as soldier or sailor, or as a civil officer” or “from the mother of such a patriot,” provided the application was “acceptable to the Society.” The Pennsylvania petition called for the phrase “mother of a patriot” to be expunged from the eligibility clause in the national society’s constitution and the substitution of “man or woman” for the word “ancestor.” Hogg’s petition raised the question of whether membership in the patriotic heredity-based organization should be based solely on lineal descent from a patriot or should collateral descent – meaning descent from the sister or brother of a patriot – also be considered grounds for membership? But in its most basic form, the question over

eligibility came down to this: What are the appropriate requirements for making the claim “I am a daughter of the American Revolution,” and what should that claim mean?

Genealogy was and continues to be the method by which the Daughters of the American Revolution and other patriotic heredity-based associations determine a person’s eligibility for membership. During the Daughters of the American Revolution’s formative years, roughly from 1890 through 1895, encompassing the eligibility debate and the first stirrings of scientific challenges to the theory of inheritance of acquired characters, the genealogy discourse produced in the pages of *American Monthly Magazine*, the organization’s primary communication vehicle, indicates that genealogy was discussed in two distinct but mutually supporting ways. On the one hand, genealogy provided evidence of one’s claim to ownership of the national story and conferred obligations to defend one’s inheritance – i.e. the “nation” – from external threats. On the other hand, the ancestral knowledge produced through genealogy provided a moral compass both to descendents of patriot ancestors, who were encouraged to “honor” their ancestors through right-living, and to larger society, guiding future cultural developments.

The dual purposes of genealogy present in the Daughters of the American Revolution’s discourse during its early years – genealogy as marker of membership in and claim to the nation and genealogy as a force for personal and societal change – can be accounted for by considering the notion of inheritance of acquired characters as the mechanics by which the social bond between patriot ancestors and their descendents constitutes “who you are.” As evidenced by discourse produced in the pages of *American Monthly Magazine*, the Daughters agreed that genealogy could reveal “who



you are,” i.e. whether you were a true “daughter of the American Revolution” and therefore capable of claiming certain rights and possessing certain obligations. But the eligibility debate reported in *American Monthly Magazine* between 1892 and 1894 also brings into relief the contentious nature of not only what that claim could and should mean but also makes visible the contention over what counts as proper genealogical evidence and what that evidence means. In other words, the eligibility debate illustrates that the rules for producing ancestral knowledge and the interpretation of that knowledge is not “natural” but open to debate.

### **Emergence of Patriotic Societies**

The Daughters of the American Revolution was one of many patriotic heredity-based societies formed during the last decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> The patriotic heredity-based societies began as an urban and primarily East Coast phenomenon among upper and middle class whites, primarily Protestants of Anglo-Saxon ancestry. These

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<sup>31</sup> There is a small body of academic literature on heredity-based patriotic societies of the late nineteenth century. Three in particular provide the historical framework for the present inquiry. Wallace Evan Davies’ 1955 book *Patriotism on Parade: The Story of Veterans’ and Hereditary Organizations in America, 1783-1900* approaches patriotic associations as a manifestation of a larger interest in “joining” following the Civil War, corresponding with the growth of cities and increased leisure time among the middle and upper classes. By his own admission, Davies’ work does “more reporting than evaluating,” and for this reason, it serves as a foundational text for other, more recent academic treatments of the subject. Wooden Sorrow Teachout’s 2003 dissertation, “Forging Memory: Hereditary Societies, Patriotism and the American Past, 1876-1898,” approaches the activities of patriotic hereditary societies as a form of “cultural criticism” based on the Revolutionary past. Using the Revolutionary past, argues Teachout, these associations criticized Anglo-American society for its sectional rancor and materialism; following the Depression of 1893, these same groups took a conservative turn and used the same history to maintain Anglo-American superiority. Finally, Francesca Constance Morgan’s 1998 dissertation, “‘Home and Country’: Women, Nation, and the Daughters of the American Revolution, 1890-1939,” focuses exclusively on the one group, examining the issue of “female nationalism.” Rather than being objects of nationalism, Morgan argues, the Daughters constituted themselves as “subjects of nationalism” through their activities, including historic preservation and Americanization programs for immigrants. Both of these dissertations draw from association archives, many for the first time, and they are therefore valuable resources for understanding these hereditary associations. Teachout and Morgan’s dissertations were particularly helpful in writing this section of the study.

organizations were just some of the many voluntary organizations that sprang up after the Civil War as industrialization promoted the movement from smaller communities to cities. The forces of modernity loosened the hold of traditional, compulsory social bonds of family and kinship; voluntary associations helped fill the gap. Urban living provided upper and middle class whites increased leisure time and opportunities for recreation with others beyond their own families.<sup>32</sup> Ancestral organizations in particular fostered exclusivity, providing a way for “old-line families” to draw a boundary between themselves and the “*nouveaux riches* of the Gilded Age” but also gave both old and new elites an outlet for displaying “their social power.”<sup>33</sup> The idea of a heredity requirement for membership in patriotic heredity-based associations rested on the genealogical assumption; the hereditary requirement of patriotic heredity-based societies reasserted the constitutive power of traditional familial bonds. The purpose of genealogy in the context of these organizations was to make visible the continuity between oneself and one’s patriot ancestors to others as justification for claims to cultural rights and responsibilities, to social privileges and obligations.

The Society of Cincinnati was the most well known and common point of reference for both advocates and critics of the new heredity-based patriotic societies in the late nineteenth century. The Society of Cincinnati, formed in 1783 in New York, began as a veterans group of former Revolutionary War officers. New members were admitted based on their ancestor’s membership in the society, and membership was limited to the eldest son of each Revolutionary ancestor. George Washington was chosen

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<sup>32</sup> Wallace Evan Davies, *Patriotism on Parade: The Story of Veterans’ and Hereditary Organizations in America, 1783-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 44-45.

<sup>33</sup> Francesca C. Morgan, “Home and Country’: Women, Nation, and the Daughters of the American Revolution, 1890-1939” (PhD diss., University of Columbia, 1998), 30.

as first president-general of the Society of Cincinnati, a post he accepted reluctantly. Washington, being apprehensive about popular perception of the group's exclusivity, served as a figurehead for the group rather than taking an active role in its activities.<sup>34</sup> The Society of Cincinnati was widely denounced as both un-American and unpatriotic. The group was attacked on two points, noted historian Wallace Davies. First, the Society of Cincinnati was targeted for establishing an aristocracy contrary to the values fought for during the war with Great Britain. Second, those outside the group feared it might become a powerful force in public affairs, preventing the working of a democracy.<sup>35</sup> By the Revolutionary War centennial celebrations in 1870s and '80s, the Society of Cincinnati's membership had dwindled to a few hundred members.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately similar criticisms were leveled at the patriotic heredity-based societies of the late nineteenth century.

Historian Wooden Teachout notes two necessary conditions for the emergence of heredity-based patriotic societies in the 1870s and '80s. The first was the series of centennial celebrations of Revolutionary-era events. The second was an emerging focus on sectional reconciliation after the Civil War.<sup>37</sup> The earliest of these post-Civil War associations was the Sons of Revolutionary Sires, formed in San Francisco in October 1875 by the grandsons and great-grandsons of Revolutionary War soldiers for the purpose of commemorating Revolutionary-era events. However, a similar effort to form a heredity-based patriotic group in New York failed the same year. Sons of the Revolution (SR) was finally founded in December 1883 in New York as a more inclusive

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<sup>34</sup> Wallace Evan Davies, *Patriotism on Parade*, 2-4.

<sup>35</sup> Wallace Evan Davies, *Patriotism on Parade*, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Wooden Sorrow Teachout, "Forging Memory: Hereditary Societies, Patriotism, and the American Past, 1876-1898" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2003), 112.

<sup>37</sup> Wooden Sorrow Teachout, "Forging Memory," 20, 50-51.

version of the Society of Cincinnati, admitting any male descendent of a Revolutionary War soldier. Why was the second effort to form a Sons of the Revolution successful and the earlier one not? Teachout argued that, unlike conditions in California, New York in 1875, like much of the East Coast, was still suffering from sectional rancor. Following the conclusion of federal involvement in Southern reconstruction in 1877, conscious efforts at sectional reconciliation were undertaken. Rather than looking to the more immediate past of the Civil War, public efforts were made to look to the distant past of the Revolutionary War when those in the North fought *with* rather than against those in the South.<sup>38</sup> Mrs. Hugh Hagan, a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, expressed the unifying spirit of these patriotic societies in a September 1892 issue of *American Monthly Magazine*, writing that the “unwritten work” of the DAR is the “re-uniting of Georgia and Massachusetts in the same bond of love that bound them in the days of Valley Forge and Yorktown.”<sup>39</sup>

The Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) was born as a spin-off branch of the Sons of the Revolution. The Sons of the Revolution was not interested in expanding outside New York, despite the fact that other groups of Sons were organizing in other states. The New York SR looked upon and treated these other groups as unequal auxiliary branches.<sup>40</sup> William McDowell, who attempted to assemble a New Jersey branch of the Sons of the Revolution in 1889, chose to create a new organization when his request for recognition by the New York Sons was rejected. McDowell organized the Sons of the American Revolution as a more socially active and inclusive association than

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<sup>38</sup> Wooden Sorrow Teachout, “Forging Memory,” 43, 45-46.

<sup>39</sup> Mrs. Hugh Hagan, “The Daughters of the American Revolution as Represented in Georgia,” *American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 3 (September 1892): 242-243.

<sup>40</sup> Wallace Evan Davies, *Patriotism on Parade*, 50.

the Sons of the Revolution, with a national membership and public mission. Of particular note, unlike the SR, the national SAR was initially open to women.<sup>41</sup> State societies in New Hampshire, Ohio, and Missouri also welcomed women members.<sup>42</sup> However, women were only welcomed into the SAR for a short time; in April 1890, the national SAR voted to restrict membership to men.

The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) was formed in response to the Sons of the American Revolution's new membership restrictions. Mary Smith Lockwood published an open letter in the *Washington Post* in July 1890 criticizing the SAR's actions as an assault on women's patriotism. In her letter, Lockwood detailed the story of Hannah Arnett, who challenged her husband to resist British offers of protection in exchange for a statement of loyalty.<sup>43</sup> By coincidence, Arnett's great, great grandson was McDowell, founder of Sons of the American Revolution and a strong supporter of women's participation in the organization. McDowell had been advocating for a women's branch of SAR since 1889, and he took the opportunity following Lockwood's letter to make his own appeal in the *Washington Post*, calling on women descended from Revolutionary-era patriots to send in their names for the purpose of forming an organization. Among those who responded were Mary Desha, Ellen Hardin Walworth, and Eugenia Washington. Together with Lockwood and McDowell, the women held an organizational meeting in Washington D.C. in August 1890. With Washington's friend Flora Adams Darling in attendance, the women elected officers and formally inaugurated

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<sup>41</sup> Wooden Sorrow Teachout, "Forging Memory," 76.

<sup>42</sup> Francesca Constance Morgan, "Home and Country," 32.

<sup>43</sup> Francesca Constance Morgan, "Home and Country," 34.

the Daughters of the American Revolution in October 1890.<sup>44</sup> Like the SAR, the DAR actively sought to expand its membership throughout the nation.<sup>45</sup> By 1896, the DAR had a total of 225 chapters.<sup>46</sup> The DAR joined part in a growing associational trend in American society. Patriotic heredity-based organizations flourished in the 1890s. In 1895, there were approximately forty-seven patriotic heredity-based societies; by 1900, there were approximately seventy, including the Society of Mayflower Descendants, Order of Founders and Patriots, and Daughters of the Republic of Texas, to name only a few.<sup>47</sup>

It is necessary to consider inheritance of acquired characters to properly account for 1890s genealogy discourse generated by patriotic heredity-based societies in general and the Daughters of the American Revolution's *American Monthly Magazine* in particular. Numerous historians agree that the hereditary requirement for membership in patriotic societies effectively served to draw a boundary between the old-stock, white, primarily Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority and "others," i.e. African and Native Americans, newer immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, etc.<sup>48</sup> I agree with this interpretation but it does not fully account for the shape of the genealogy discourse produced by patriotic heredity-based societies – for example, their description of genealogy as a moral force – nor does it fully explain the logic of the DAR's eligibility debate described below because the argument concerned lines of demarcation between

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<sup>44</sup> Wallace Evan Davies, *Patriotism on Parade*, 58-59.

<sup>45</sup> Francesca C. Morgan, "Home and Country," 29.

<sup>46</sup> Francesca C. Morgan, "Home and Country," 61.

<sup>47</sup> Wallace Evan Davies, *Patriotism on Parade*, 44.

<sup>48</sup> See for example Francesca C. Morgan, who places the hereditary requirement for membership in the context of "a broader movement by white Americans to reconcile and reunify the North and South in the wake of the Civil War and Reconstruction" through "black exclusion," "Home and Country," 5.

old-stock middle and upper class women themselves, not just lines separating old-stock from new-stock immigrants. In their treatment of genealogy as a moral force, the Daughters emphasized the environmental element of inheritance of acquired characters and genealogy and family history's potential to bring about change in the moral direction of society in the industrial age, while their application process emphasized the importance of the permanence and continuity of "blood." These two sides of inheritance of acquired characters were on display and in tension in the eligibility debate.

### **Daughters of the American Revolution's Genealogy Discourse**

During the first five years of its existence, the Daughters of the American Revolution approached genealogy in two distinct but mutually supporting ways in the pages of *American Monthly Magazine*. On the one hand, the ancestral knowledge produced through genealogy identified the descendent as the inheritor of character traits and the spirit of "true Americanism," which the descendent was obligated to perpetuate among her family and the larger public through public education programs, commemoration of patriots and Revolutionary-era events, and historical preservation. This dimension of the discourse stressed the permanent quality of one's hereditary inheritance, indicative of "who you are." On the other hand, genealogy was treated as a moral force in one's family life and in larger society, a practice which promotes right-living, i.e. doing nothing to disgrace the family name and teaching not only one's children but also the wider public about the principles and heroic deeds of the colonial patriots. This element of the discourse suggested that shared "blood" between oneself and one's patriot ancestor hardly solidified one's status in American society and culture;

living the principles of the Revolutionary patriots in one's life is what ensured their transmission to one's children.

The descendents of the Revolutionary patriots, according to *American Monthly Magazine*, had a special obligation to “uplift” their nation at a time of social and cultural crisis, i.e. sectional reconciliation, increasing industrialization and urbanization, labor unrest, the arrival of immigrants from Southern and Eastern European countries. The responsibility was premised on a sense of threat to the social and cultural authority of old-stock, white upper and middle class Protestants in the United States, the people most attracted to patriotic heredity-based societies. Mrs. DeWitt Clinton Mather of New Jersey told Daughters at the 1893 Continental Congress that a cursory glance might lead one to “conclude that the character of American women has undergone a change since the Revolution,” considering the Revolutionary-era women's side-by-side struggle with patriot men in securing liberty.<sup>49</sup> Women had to step up and assume responsibility for the direction of the nation. National degeneration could be avoided if the descendents of patriots held fast to the bedrock principles of the American Revolution, to “true Americanism.” Invoking former President Grover Cleveland, the “Principle of Organization” of the Daughters of the American Revolution stated that “true Americanism” rested on “love of our government, for its own sake and for what it is,” which is an “essential factor of citizenship.” And, with the graft, the corruption, and the excessive materialism resulting from industrialization in mind, the DAR held that “true

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<sup>49</sup> Mrs. DeWitt Clinton Mather, “Some Women of the Revolution and Their Descendents,” *American Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 3 (September 1893): 257.



Americanism” required understanding that “our government is not suited to a selfish and sordid people, and that in their hands it is not safe.”<sup>50</sup>

The responsibility to “preserve the dignity of virtue” and “rescue” the “noble sentiment” of “true Americanism” from “degradation” was conferred through “blood” and family name, a responsibility that genealogy made known to descendents of Revolutionary patriots. In an address to the Athens, Georgia Chapter, University of Georgia professor H.A. White told the assembled that despite the Revolutionary generation’s denial of privilege and commitment to “equality before the law,” there have been and always will be “classes and distinction of men.” The “honor and respect which a man may acquire will descend to his child; it has ever been so; it will always be so; it is natural and it is right.” Instead of “special privilege,” the founders asserted the “equal rights of all” and extended to all citizens an “obligation to so conduct” themselves in such a way that “social peace, fair dealing and happy contented lives might be secured to all his fellow citizens.” Even so, in American society, the “possession of an honorable name may convey no special privilege but only carry with it an additional responsibility,” and should that responsibility be met by “righteous conduct, virtuous character and unblemished life,” then no one can “deny to the possessor of goodly heritage the prestige, the honor and the consideration which such inheritance has always merited and received.” The Daughters of the American Revolution, said White, should therefore be

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<sup>50</sup> “Principles of Organization of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution,” *American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 1. (July 1892): 8-9.

“commended for a patriotic service if it incites among its members the determination to bear with pride and worthiness the honors of its honorable ancestry.”<sup>51</sup>

At numerous points in *American Monthly Magazine* the national narrative, the story of America’s founding and settlement, was treated as an object, a family relic, passed down from generation to generation. Mrs. Mather, for example, said that to the Sons and Daughters of the Revolution were “*bequeathed* this vast country, its government, and its possibilities of wealth and greatness. It was *acquired* by our ancestors,” and the Daughters of the American Revolution “implore the men of America to perpetuate to our descendents this, our *inheritance*.”<sup>52</sup> Elsewhere in his address, White spoke of the “generations of Americans who” stood “between us and the Revolutionary fathers” who were “keenly appreciative of the wonderful resources of the land, and have wrought a work of material development which in magnitude and in rapidity of execution stands unequaled among the marvels of the world.” The liberty won by the patriots, said White, has been carefully passed down through generations and its future now rests with the living descendents of the patriot founders.<sup>53</sup> Mrs. John M. Chretien of San Francisco told the 1893 Continental Congress that the “honorable descent” from a patriot ancestor has given each Daughter “some fragment of the unpublished history of the Revolution.”<sup>54</sup> Such statements suggest a chain of action that connects the individual Daughter to the settlement, founding, and growth of the American nation, and through their individual

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<sup>51</sup> H.A. White, Address before Athens, Georgia Chapter on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1892, *American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 6 (December 1892): 637-638.

<sup>52</sup> Mrs. DeWitt Clinton Mather, “Some Women of the Revolution and Their Descendents,” *American Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 3 (September 1893): 259; emphasis added.

<sup>53</sup> H.A. White, Address before Athens, Georgia Chapter on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1892, *American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 6 (December 1892): 641-642..

<sup>54</sup> Mrs. John A. Chretien, “An Unsealed Book,” *American Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 3 (September 1893): 268.

family histories, the whole of the American nation is conjured up. Of course this image of the American nation, made visible by the heroics of patriot ancestors, eclipses the other concrete lives that shared space with the patriots and their descendents and participated in the existential chain of action: non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants, African slaves, indigenous peoples.

There is nothing elitist or aristocratic about family pride, the Daughters asserted. The primary argument set forth by the patriotic heredity-based societies for their democratic credentials was that they did not demand direct lineage from an officer in the army, as the Society of Cincinnati did, but rather from any individual – from ditch digger to military officer – who contributed to the patriot’s cause. Ellen Harrell Cantrell of Arkansas told her readers that there are only benefits to be derived from tracing one’s ancestors back to the “ranks of American soldiery.” But “To go beyond this limit in search of ancestors . . . is to lose the pitch of national American character, and to become hollow reeds, piping the hymns of other nations.”<sup>55</sup> What was transferred from the founding patriots to their descendents was not privilege but character. “Happy are the people who have so noble a history,” wrote Mrs. Clifton Breckinridge of Arkansas, but “thrice happy are they if the high character, stirling [sic] virtues, simple manners, and immortal principles of their ancestors can be transmitted to succeeding generations.”<sup>56</sup>

Claims to democratic intentions and methods, however, did not stop the Daughters from excluding inappropriate applicants, and the discourse in *American Monthly Magazine* clearly indicates a divide between “us” and “them,” between

<sup>55</sup> Ellen Harrell Cantrell, “What Genealogy Is,” *American Monthly Magazine* 7, no. 5 (November 1895): 394; for another example see Mrs. Hugh Hagan, “The Daughters of the American Revolution as Represented in Georgia,” *American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 3 (September 1892): 242.

<sup>56</sup> Mrs. Clifton Breckinridge, *American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 1 (July 1892): 29.

protectors of “true Americanism” and its enemies. Mrs. Mather described the enemies as “alien,” “ignorant,” “vicious,” and “more deadly to our institutions than were the Hessian allies of England.”<sup>57</sup> Harriet Stone Lathrop of Concord, Massachusetts, describing a statue representing “the Republic” at the World’s Fair, expressed regret it did not remain as “white” as the “eternal truth” it supposedly represented. “The gilt put over the wonderfully calm and heroic face and figure,” said Lathrop, “was all too symbolic of what the Republic should not become. To keep it white and pure and strong is largely women’s work and privilege.”<sup>58</sup> Teachout notes, “The hereditary groups’ vision of democracy” was “democracy of the past rather than the present.”<sup>59</sup> The imagined “nation” conjured up by the Daughters of the American Revolution and other patriotic heredity-based societies included multiple classes of white contributors to the patriot cause but actively excluded certain concrete, historical participants in the American Revolution – blacks, Jews, etc. In addition to elements of discourse distinguishing between “us” and “them,” the DAR codified “acceptability” in their rules, explicitly banning “colored” women in 1894.<sup>60</sup> The genealogical assumption intersects with this imagined “nation,” providing a rationale behind claims to membership in a culturally dominant vision of the United States.

In *American Monthly Magazine*, daughters of the American Revolution, as opposed to the sons, had a fundamental role to play in perpetuating the values of the Revolutionary-era patriots as mothers. “A thoughtful survey of the history of the world

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<sup>57</sup> Mrs. DeWitt Clinton Mather, “Some Women of the Revolution and Their Descendents,” *American Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 3 (September 1893): 259.

<sup>58</sup> Harriet Stone Lathrop, Response to President-General’s Address, *American Monthly Magazine* 6, no. 3 (March 1895): 257.

<sup>59</sup> Wooden Sorrow Teachout, “Forging Memory,” 132.

<sup>60</sup> Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 46.

demonstrates that great occasions produce great men and women,” individuals capable of meeting the challenges of their moment, wrote Harriet Bulkley Larrabee of Louisville, Kentucky. Women in particular have been “essential and potent” factors in history’s reform movements, soothing the “restless babe,” “holding in check the rash and impulsive man,” and exciting to “action the heroic deeds of the soldier.”<sup>61</sup> It is from the mother, Larrabee asserted, that “all actions either good or bad are inherited by the actor,” therefore mothers should “guard well” their “thoughts and actions” so as to “secure” for their “offspring all those virtues which are found in the good and noble.”<sup>62</sup> Persifor Frazer, a member of the Sons of the Revolution and the DAR advisory board, likewise noted the fundamental role of mothers as the “channel through which the blood” of a “glorious ancestor” is united with a “male descendent.” The “inheritance of character as well as of physical attributes is a fact too well known to need discussion,” and despite Darwin’s recognition of “variation from original type,” there is a “strong tendency to perpetuate any striking characteristics; so that a good republican is likely to have a good republican for a son.”<sup>63</sup>

Genealogy and family history was one channel through which the character traits of the Revolutionary patriots would be passed onto descendants. “The outcome of all this genealogical research,” wrote Larrabee, “will be a revival of commendable family pride which for centuries” throughout the States has “stimulated virtue and repressed vice.”

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<sup>61</sup> In emphasizing the role of woman as shelter and comfort to children and men, the Daughters also gloried in stories of women actively engaged against the British during the war, taking up arms and protecting the community, and outwitting Tories and British soldiers. See for example Maria Spalding Lyman, “Women as Patriots,” *American Monthly Magazine* 5, no. 3 (September 1894): 209-211.

<sup>62</sup> Harriet Bulkley Larrabee, “The Future America – On Whom Does It Depend,” *American Monthly Magazine* 7 (1895): 15-16.

<sup>63</sup> Persifor Frazer, “Proceedings of the 1892 Continental Congress,” *American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 2 (August 1892): 142, 148.

Unlike other associations for which wealth grants access, the admission guidelines of the Daughters of the American Revolution “will be one step toward the purification of society, as historical research and genealogical records will enlighten and inspire an interest in historical facts and true romance.” Larrabee reminded her readers that the decline of the Roman Empire was the result of relaxing “family pride in noble deeds and actions.” She anticipated the revival of family pride through genealogical research and believed that historical preservation would result in “fewer candidates for the insane asylums and the penitentiaries and fewer divorces and less suicides” since the “majority of young minds will tend to imitate the good and virtuous.”<sup>64</sup> Cantrell concurred: in the process of “tracing our lines back to colonial pioneers” or to the “ranks of American soldiery” of the Revolution “we become unconsciously animated with the spirit that ruled them.” When children learn of the heroic acts of their patriot ancestors, “a thrill of unmixed delight will stir and expand their beings” and promote good behavior so as not to “cast a blur on the family escutcheon.”<sup>65</sup>

A logical corollary of treating genealogy as a moral force in family and public life was an emphasis on records (and relics) preservation, the raw materials of genealogy and family history. Gertrude Van Rensselaer Wickham of Cleveland, Ohio, for example, reminded *American Monthly* readers that “we are a widely scattered sisterhood.” Therefore it is incumbent upon DAR members in New England to “carefully examine” their “church and State records” and those in the Middle States “their priceless Dutch Bibles” while those in the South Atlantic comb “their cherished annals of the

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<sup>64</sup> Harriet Bulkley Larrabee, “The Future America – On Whom Does It Depend,” *American Monthly Magazine* 7 (1895): 18-19.

<sup>65</sup> Ellen Harrell Cantrell, “What Genealogy Is,” *American Monthly Magazine* 7, no. 5 (November 1895): 394.

Revolutionary strife.” The result of “concerted action” will be a “valuable supplement to the public archives.”<sup>66</sup> Such salvaged historical materials made possible the restoration from obscurity of many “lost” heroes and heroines of the Revolutionary War. Mrs. Hugh Hagan of Atlanta, Georgia wrote that through the “new impulse of research many a forgotten” hero and heroine “has been brought to light” to shed an “unexpected luster upon” his or her “descendents of the nineteenth century.” At the February 1892 meeting of the Atlanta Chapter, Mrs. Hagan recounted the deeds of Nancy Hart who held a group of Tories at bay by gunpoint until patriots arrived.<sup>67</sup> The sharing of such histories was a regular occurrence at DAR meetings throughout the country. The family history offered by the daughters at chapter meetings envisioned the national narrative as a heroic epic, with each patriot – man or woman – animated by stellar character, rising up against a foreign foe. The story of America looked past the Civil War, differences over the meaning of the Constitution, and the Union’s near disintegration over the issue of slavery to a “founding moment” defined by resistance to external threats.

The genealogy and family history research required as the first step in membership to the Daughters of the American Revolution laid the groundwork for a claim to ownership and responsibility for the future of the American nation. The application process for admission into the DAR in the 1890s amounted to a credentialing process. By submitting one’s genealogy for approval to the national society, the applicant submitted credentials for making the claim, “I am a daughter of the American Revolution.” Teachout notes that the patriotic heredity-based societies essentially used

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<sup>66</sup> Gertrude Van Rensselaer Wickham, “The Mission of the Daughters of the American Revolution is that of Restoration, Preservation and Education,” *American Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 1 (July 1893): 2.

<sup>67</sup> Mrs. Hugh Hagan, “The Daughters of the American Revolution as Represented in Georgia,” *American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 3 (September 1892): 239-240.

the same application form, which included a “genealogical ladder,” which the applicant used to outline her genealogy to the patriot ancestor. “When all these generations were laid out on the page,” writes Teachout, “the visual impact of the list served to underscore a sense of connection between the applicant and the patriotic ancestor.” The second major feature of the application form was a space for detailing the manner in which the ancestor aided in the patriot cause.<sup>68</sup> The application form was dominated by an ancestral fill-in-the-blank. The applicant began by identifying the ancestor through which one wished to make a claim to membership. Then, beginning with oneself, the application required the applicant to fill in spaces for one’s father and mother, grandfather and grandmother, great-grandfather, great-grandmother and so on back to the patriot ancestor who is named and then whose service to the patriot cause is explained. Finally, the application required a recommendation from an existing member of the organization to meet the “acceptability” criteria. The DAR Lineage Books catalogued and made a daughter’s claim public.

### **Daughters of the American Revolution Eligibility Debate**

The claim-making potential that comes with membership into the Daughters of the American Revolution meant that the lineage and documentary requirements for entry were of significant importance to the members of the organization. Despite pronouncements about the group’s democratic motives, the effect of membership was exclusivity. The eligibility debate taking place in DAR meetings around the country and in the pages of *American Monthly Magazine* between 1892 and 1894 was in essence a debate over who gets to make the claim “I am a daughter of the American Revolution”

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<sup>68</sup> Wooden Sorrow Teachout, “Forging Memory,” 118-119.



and over the group's preferred meaning for that claim. An examination of that debate highlights multiple opinions about the significance of heredity, the process by which heredity is made known, and the consequences of that knowledge in both the context of the organization and American society and culture in general. The eligibility debate exposes differences in the interpretation of the claim "I am a daughter of the American Revolution" and whether that should be taken literally or figuratively.

The primary argument put forth by Hogg and others in favor of amending the national society's constitution was that the current eligibility clause opened the possibility for Tory "blood" to enter the association and for an applicant who gained membership through a possibly disloyal "mother of a patriot" to make an equal claim as a "daughter" of the American Revolution. According to Hogg, under the current constitution, the "lineal descendents of a Tory can, through the mother of that Tory, provided she had also a Patriot son, sit side by side, on the same level and bearing the same name, with the descendents of that Patriot." Hogg further asserted in the same article that the "mother of a patriot" clause was doing significant harm to the DAR because "many lineal descendents are declining to unite with a society which gives equal honors to collateral relatives and descendents of Tories as would be given to them."<sup>69</sup>

Those in favor of retaining the current eligibility clause received their strongest voice in Helen M. Boynton, Vice President in charge of Organization.<sup>70</sup> Boynton's argument revolved primarily around the issue of lack of evidence of – and yet the need to

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<sup>69</sup> Julia K. Hogg, "Eligibility – 'Lineal Descent'," *American Monthly Magazine* 2, no. 1 (January 1893): 104.

<sup>70</sup> Boynton, however, did not gain membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution through a collateral line. Her biography in *American Monthly Magazine* noted, "She is very proud of her American blood, and says that the most highly prized compliment she ever received was from a noted sculptor who said she had a 'marked American face'." See "Mrs. H.V. Boynton," *American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 5 (November 1892): 422-423.

honor – women’s service to the patriot cause. While the burden of argument rested on those who desired a change in the national society’s constitution, Boynton strongly argued in favor of retaining the “mother of a patriot” clause because it enabled women to honor other women whose service – as mothers, sisters, etc. – was unrecognized in written documentation. The amendment, said Boynton, would ignore women not descended from soldiers unless they “rendered actual service, or *can prove their patriotism.*”<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the “mother of a patriot” clause provided a way to honor childless patriots who would otherwise be forgotten. During a discussion about the eligibility amendment in July 1893, Mrs. Hamlin stated, “thousands of women of Revolutionary times” have no documentation. The “humble mother and humble sisters, who plowed the ground, who spun the yarn, who knit the stockings, and who formed the base of supplies for the army” should be recognized.<sup>72</sup> Or as Miriam Longfellow Morris wrote in her poem to honor the humble role played by wives and mothers, “Why do I give her rank? ... Because she builded still the house; because, as corner-stone, / All deeds of valor, truth and might are still her own!”<sup>73</sup>

Boynton and others in favor of retaining the “mother of a patriot” clause also argued that it made for a stronger, more influential organization. The Daughters of the American Revolution was founded with the intention of gaining a national membership and influencing the future direction of the nation. Would it be better, Boynton said, for the society to be less “common” or to “wield wider, greater influence by admitting all

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<sup>71</sup> Helen M. Boynton, “Eligibility – ‘Mother of a Patriot,’” *American Monthly Magazine* 2, no. 1 (January 1893): 107.

<sup>72</sup> Mrs. Hamlin, “A Discussion for the Good of the Society,” *American Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 1 (July 1893): 99; also see Lillian Pike, “A Discussion for the Good of the Society,” *American Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 1 (July 1893): 92.

<sup>73</sup> Miriam Longfellow Morris, “The Mother of a Patriot,” *American Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 3 (September 1893): 305.

who can fairly represent the loyal families of the Revolution”?<sup>74</sup> Boynton further argued that the DAR would not want to find itself in the same situation facing the Society of Cincinnati: with its extremely restrictive admission policies, the Society of Cincinnati was dwindling in numbers almost to the point of extinction.<sup>75</sup>

Much more significant, however, was Boynton and others’ argument that retaining the “mother of a patriot” clause corresponded with the DAR’s objectives and was in keeping with the “spirit” of the Revolution the organization sought to honor. Those against the amendment seemed to take a more activist view of the association’s goals. Boynton wrote that if the organization was only interested in “preserving records of lineal descent, then it is not exclusive to shut out all who are not in that line.” But if the society wished to “promote patriotism and service for the country,” then it was doing damage to that goal by excluding collaterals.<sup>76</sup> Lillian Pike argued during discussion of the amendment that restricting membership only to those of lineal descent went against the very principles for which the patriots fought. “To restrict our membership within such narrow limits is un-American, non-progressive, retrograding to feudalism.” More important to “cherish the race” and “principle of greatness,” said Pike, than to “establish a hereditary aristocracy.”<sup>77</sup> Added Mary Isabella Forsythe, “The more we restrict our membership, the less we are in accordance with the spirit of the men and women of the

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<sup>74</sup> Helen M. Boynton, “Eligibility – ‘Mother of a Patriot,’” *American Monthly Magazine* 2, no. 1 (January 1893): 108.

<sup>75</sup> Helen M. Boynton, “Eligibility – ‘Mother of a Patriot,’” *American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 5 (November 1892): 500.

<sup>76</sup> Helen M. Boynton, “Eligibility – ‘Mother of a Patriot,’” *American Monthly Magazine* 2, no. 1 (January 1893): 108; see also Helen M. Boynton, “A Discussion for the Good of the Society,” *American Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 1 (July 1893): 95.

<sup>77</sup> Lillian Pike, “Discussion for the Good of the Society,” *American Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 1 (July 1893): 92.

American Revolution.”<sup>78</sup> In this context, these members use the term “daughters” in a figurative sense, the inheritance an idea rather than something material. We are inheritors of the American Revolution, asserted Forsythe, the “inheritors of the principles and the sacred fire of that glorious epoch”; it is not strictly about “blood” descent.<sup>79</sup>

The women in favor of amending the constitution offered their own counter-arguments to the “mother of a patriot” camp. Evidence for women’s active service in the cause of independence had indeed been documented, they said. In a report issued by the State Regents of Virginia and Georgia, the following sources for identifying proof of loyalty were noted: “histories of the Revolutionary War fireside annals, family memoranda, and letters.”<sup>80</sup> Also mentioned, with debated usefulness, was Elizabeth F. Ellet’s *The Women of the American Revolution*, first published in 1848. (The problem of obtaining documentary proof of ancestry and service continued to be a problem after the eligibility question was settled. For example, an October 1897 article by Annie Mell of Auburn, Alabama, addressed continued difficulties in generating membership in the South because of an inability to appropriately document lineage and service to the patriot cause due to a deficit of public records in the region. Mell suggested that DAR “officers should be less exacting in the rule strictly requiring printed or official proof of the ancestor’s service, when other proof” – e.g. relics, tradition – “can be obtained of nearly equal importance.”<sup>81</sup>)

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<sup>78</sup> Miss Forsythe, “Discussion for the Good of the Society,” *American Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 1 (July 1893): 98.

<sup>79</sup> Mary Isabella Forsythe, “The Eligibility Question,” *American Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 5 (November 1893): 564.

<sup>80</sup> “Report of a Joint Committee,” *American Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 5 (November 1893): 560.

<sup>81</sup> Annie White Mell, “Obstacles to D.A.R. Work in the South,” *American Monthly Magazine* 11, no. 4 (October 1897): 364, 370.

More significantly, those in favor of amending the constitution argued that the current eligibility requirements opened the association up to charges of not being actual “daughters” of the American Revolution by those outside of the association. The name of the organization, Daughters of the American Revolution, should “mean what it asserts in letter as well as in spirit,” said “K.”<sup>82</sup> The group in favor of amendment believed the word “daughter” should be taken in its literal sense rather than figurative sense if it was to be a claim with any particular force in American society and culture. The line of ancestors, said Almy Priscilla Alden of California, “should be broad and well defined.” Even the “slightest divergence” destroys the “line of continuity and breaks the harmony of the Society.”<sup>83</sup> The strength of the society, Alden held, came from the quality of its membership and not its quantity. It is the blood of Revolutionary patriots, Sara A. Pryor of Virginia asserted, which holds the society together rather than just “noble objects and aims.”<sup>84</sup>

Finally, those in favor of amending the constitution argued such a change would be in keeping with the objectives of the Daughters of the American Revolution, which were historical preservation and commemoration of the Revolution’s heroes and not merely the promotion of patriotism. The object of the DAR, wrote Hogg, is “historic research for, and preservation of, loyal efforts and brave deeds,” and “appreciation should be shown the self-sacrificing service” of both men and women. Eligibility through the “mother of a patriot,” however, was eligibility by “circumstance, and not by service.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> “K,” “Eligibility,” *American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 6 (December 1892): 671.

<sup>83</sup> Almy Priscilla Alden, “Eligibility – ‘Lineal Descent’,” *American Monthly Magazine* 2, no. 1 (January 1893): 123.

<sup>84</sup> Sara A. Pryor, “Eligibility,” *American Monthly Magazine* 2, no. 1 (January 1893): 127.

<sup>85</sup> Julia K. Hogg, “Eligibility – ‘Lineal Descent’,” *American Monthly Magazine* 2, no. 1 (January 1893): 105.

As it stands, the “mother of a patriot” clause “hinders historical research” because once one patriot is identified descendants of the brothers and sisters of that patriot can enter through the mother without additional research.<sup>86</sup> Eliminating the “mother of a patriot” clause, it was argued, would foster additional historical research into and preservation of Revolutionary-era records. Lucia E. Blount, historian-general for the organization, argued that women’s heroic activities have not been fully recorded, and the removal of the “mother of a patriot” clause would prompt greater research into the service of women patriots. “It is because I wish to encourage the search among musty old letters for true pictures of the home life of our Revolutionary heroes, that I ask for this change” in the constitution, wrote Blount.<sup>87</sup> Finally, added “H. S.,” “We are distinctly a genealogical society, and are pledged to pursue our work within these lines.”<sup>88</sup>

Another set of voices, albeit voices with restraint attempting to stay above the fray, were those of the founders who explained in separate instances the origins and purpose of the “mother of a patriot” clause. In a November 1892 article, Ellen Hardin Walworth stated that the current eligibility clause was adopted at the October 1890 organizational meeting and was accepted based on the fact that women had often been “overlooked or ignored in the commemoration of Revolutionary heroism.” The choice to honor women’s service as mothers, wrote Walworth, was in keeping with the “spirit of the eighteenth century when the whole force of woman’s intellectual power was given

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<sup>86</sup> Elizabeth Henry Lyons, “Eligibility – ‘Shall Loyalty Be the Supreme Test?’,” *American Monthly Magazine* 2, no. 1 (January 1893): 112.

<sup>87</sup> Lucia E. Blount, “The Eligibility Amendment,” *American Monthly Magazine* 2, no. 6 (June 1893): 692-693.

<sup>88</sup> “H. S.,” “A Brief Reply to the Circular of Mrs. Boynton on Collateral Descent, Addressed to Chapters,” *American Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 5 (November 1893): 568. Note: This was the only occasion where I saw anyone identify the DAR as a “genealogical society”; it is not a “phrase” that seemed to be widely used in the early years of *American Monthly Magazine* as a way to describe the organization.

over to the duties of motherhood,” as well as in keeping with the “progressive spirit of the nineteenth” by giving descendents of mothers of patriots a place in the society.<sup>89</sup> Mary Desha added her voice to the debate in the July 1893 issue of *American Monthly Magazine*. Desha reported that the “mother of a patriot” clause was added at the suggestion of William McDowell’s daughter as a way to “honor those women of whom we could get no record, except through the record of their sons and brothers.” Desha made the decision to enter the association using the “mother of a patriot” clause. Even though she could claim lineal descent through her grandfather and had the necessary evidence, Desha chose to honor her grandmother who “lost her husband, her brother, and her son” in the war but for whom she had only “family traditions” as evidence of her loyalty.<sup>90</sup>

When the vote was finally called at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Continental Congress in 1894, the assembled body overwhelmingly sided with restricting membership to those of lineal descent from a recognized patriot. In her final plea to the Congress, Hogg stated “there cannot be a collateral descendent. Descendents must be lineal, and I think it is unfair to force upon the descendents the recognition of collateral relations on an equal claim with their own.” In restricting membership to only lineal descendents, said Hogg, we will ensure that “our name may mean something,” that “we are in very truth Daughters of the American Revolution.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ellen Hardin Walworth, “Eligibility,” *American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 5 (November 1892): 493-494.

<sup>90</sup> Mary Desha, “Discussion for the Good of the Society,” *American Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 1 (July 1893): 81-82.

<sup>91</sup> Julia K. Hogg, “Proceedings of the Third Continental Congress,” *American Monthly Magazine* 4, no. 6 (June 1894): 622-623.

## Discussion

The Daughters of the American Revolution became a much more conservative, perhaps even reactionary, organization as it moved into the twentieth century. The national organization eventually took strong stances against immigration and radical politics, but its formative years illuminate a moment when the genealogical assumption still pointed the organization in multiple directions – towards spreading public patriotism and towards historic preservation and genealogy – and the exact rules for its genealogy practice were still being determined. The Daughters of the American Revolution called upon the genealogical assumption to justify its hereditary requirement and the purpose of the organization, but according to the discourse produced in *American Monthly Magazine* during the organization's formative years, the appropriate rules for producing ancestral knowledge and what ancestral knowledge indicated were open to debate and multiple interpretations.

By 1895, the Daughters decided that documentary evidence of patriotic service and direct lineage was the only path to membership, provided a prospective member was also “acceptable,” i.e. white, generally middle or upper class, etc. On the one hand, genealogy drew a line of continuity between a patriot ancestor and daughter of the American Revolution, visualized in the application form. Based on the social bond manifested in a daughter's genealogy, she laid claim to not only membership but also guardianship of the nation and ownership of the American “story”; the rhetoric implies at times a material inheritance from Revolutionary ancestors. But there are moments in the discourse when character traits are not seen as permanent and in danger of disappearing. In these instances, genealogy and family history provided a moral compass that



encouraged the perpetuation of character and principles in oneself, one's children, and the larger public. The character traits passed down from patriot ancestor to DAR member, in this scenario, might be lost through negligence and must be actively perpetuated.

The visualization of ancestral knowledge, the “genealogical ladder” presented on the Daughters of the American Revolution application form, departed from the antiquarian and emerging professional genealogy tradition by tracing only one line of ancestry to one distant ancestor rather than researching entire families. In the context of the DAR, the only significant ancestral knowledge was produced from documentary evidence of a direct link between a patriot whose service was substantiated by written proof and the prospective Daughter. Other members of the patriot's family – regardless of whether they were direct or collateral relations – did not factor into the determination of eligibility, though such knowledge may have factored into acceptability. The genealogy and family history research, however, also potentially challenged narratives of the American nation which excluded women as significant players. The “mother of a patriot” clause attempted to honor the presumed contributions of mothers who reared their patriot sons, but the membership ultimately decided that proof of loyalty better met the larger goal of bringing women's service into view.

The genealogical assumption provided a way for the Daughters of the American Revolution to conjure up and intervene in the “imagined” community of the American nation. Reaching past the then recent Civil War to the Revolutionary-era, the Daughters of the American Revolution and other patriotic heredity-based societies produced an image of a unified nation of heroic, white, Anglo-Saxon patriots. The DAR, however, stressed the role of women in winning American independence.

### 1.3 Genealogical Society of Utah and Mormon Genealogy

#### Introduction

As reported in Salt Lake City's *Deseret Evening News* in October 1907, Dr. Seymour B. Young, a prominent leader in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, first encountered Thomas B. Bicknell during a train ride to the East Coast in spring 1876. Conversation in the sleeper car turned towards genealogy and the history of the Bicknell family. Dr. Young, son of Jane Bicknell and Joseph Young, was naturally interested in Bicknell's recent foray into genealogical research. When asked by Young why he was so interested in genealogy and family history, Bicknell "replied he did not know; he said that his desire to prosecute this work was greater than any other desire he possessed," and he would not "rest till he had accomplished what he had set out for."<sup>92</sup> As a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Dr. Young most certainly could have accounted for Bicknell's enthusiasm for genealogy and family history. Through the work of the Genealogical Society of Utah, Mormons such as Young were made aware of the supreme importance of genealogical research in God's plan of salvation, were taught genealogical research techniques, and were reminded of Church doctrines concerning baptism for the dead and the creation of eternal families.

While the Genealogical Society of Utah shared the field of genealogy with many others, including the patriotic heredity-based societies and eugenics leaders and advocates, its approach to genealogy was unique because of the religious context into which it was put. As the primary genealogy advocacy group for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Society's view of genealogy practice was shaped by

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<sup>92</sup> "Genealogy, The Bicknell Family, etc.," *Deseret Evening News* (Salt Lake City, UT), 8 October 1907.

Mormon ideas and doctrine. Unlike the other cases in this portion of the monograph which used genealogy to make visible a line of hereditary transmission, members of the Genealogical Society of Utah treated genealogy as a step in the process of constructing eternal families and bringing about universal salvation. However, according to Mormon genealogy discourse, individual Saints were also called upon to situate their individual genealogy in a larger racialist framework, into the “grand family of man” – an imagined community encompassing far more than Revolutionary patriots but still hierarchical in terms of “favored-ness.” In this section, I will examine modern Mormon genealogy discourse and highlight the constructivist elements in Mormon genealogy practice while illustrating how these constructivist elements operated within a larger bio-racial framework.

### **The Latter-day Saints: History and Doctrine**

A short historical sketch of the founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and a brief discussion of relevant doctrine is helpful in situating the events surrounding Mormon genealogy practice during the 1890s and early decades of the twentieth century. According to Mormon religious tradition, through a series of divine revelations, Joseph Smith Jr. of Palmyra, New York, was directed in September 1827 to a set of hidden ancient gold plates containing the unknown history of the lost tribes of Israel in the Americas. With the assistance of Oliver Cowdery and others, Smith “transcribed” the plates and published the text as the *Book of Mormon* in March 1830. Smith and Cowdery were visited by John the Baptist and Christian apostles Peter, James, and John in May 1829. These biblical figures conferred the priesthood authority, i.e. the power to perform sacraments and ordinances such as baptism in God’s name, to Smith

and Cowdery, thereby “restoring” the “true” church of Jesus Christ after centuries of false teachings. Through the *Book of Mormon* and his own charismatic personality, Smith acquired a small congregation composed of family members and witnesses to the existence of the gold plates who formally organized the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in April 1830 in Fayette, New York.

The early years of the Church were punctuated by a series of persecutions and migrations of Saints as they sought to develop a gathering place, a new Zion. The Saints began gathering in Kirtland, Ohio and Independence, Missouri during 1831. Persecution of the Saints – both daily verbal abuse and eventually physical violence – was partially the result of their tendency to collect in one location and isolate themselves both economically and culturally. For example, the Saints often only traded with other Saints. Furthermore, the Saints generally voted as a single bloc, so their presence in an area could have an effect on close elections. Saints were accused by those near their Missouri communities of agitating among the Native Americans. Finally, the Saints posed a visible threat to the religious values of other settlers. Protestant churches considered the Mormon belief in continued revelation heresy, and the claim to having the “true” gospel caused tensions with neighboring churches.<sup>93</sup> Attacks on the Missouri Saints escalated in 1833, resulting in their expulsion from the area. Citizens of Illinois offered the Saints refuge in the state, where they established the community of Nauvoo in early 1839.

During the Saints’ Nauvoo years, the community became more theocratic in organization and Smith revealed doctrines concerning salvation of the dead and plural

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<sup>93</sup> See Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), Chapter Three – Early Persecutions for the effect of gathering on persecution of the Saints and Claudia Lauper Bushman and Richard Lyman Bushman, *Building the Kingdom: A History of Mormons in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 16.

marriage. Smith took command of government in Nauvoo and instituted a militia. The revelation of plural marriage in particular caused considerable conflict among the community of Saints. When criticism of Smith and his actions were raised in the local newspaper, Smith had the paper shut. Neighboring towns and others involved in Illinois government became increasingly concerned about the Nauvoo community's isolation and Smith's militancy. Following Smith's closure of Nauvoo's free press, the state government took actions against Smith and others in Nauvoo's leadership. Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were murdered by a mob in Carthage, Illinois, in June 1844. Smith's successor, Brigham Young, finished the Nauvoo Temple and then directed the Church's exodus to Utah in autumn 1846. The first migratory party arrived in the Salt Lake Valley in October 1847. Church leadership organized a Mormon state, called Deseret – a word derived from the *Book of Mormon* meaning “honeybee” – and elected leaders. The United States Congress created the Utah Territory in 1850, appointing Young as territorial governor.

In addition to these historical facts, an understanding of basic Mormon theological premises and doctrines is necessary for comprehending the Latter-day Saints' approach to genealogy. The first and most important premise is the Mormon belief in continuous and progressive revelations by God to His people, the belief that God continues to speak to His people in the same manner He spoke to the biblical patriarchs and prophets. A logical consequence of this premise is that additions or corrections can be made to scripture and doctrine as new information is revealed to the people. While many Protestant denominations accepted that God impacted the lives of human beings, they believed “God spoke in metaphors and symbols, which were manifested through

subjective, spiritual experiences.” Not so in Mormonism; the Saints held and continue to believe that God and the Jesus are physical beings, who speak in voices, etc.<sup>94</sup>

In the context of a discussion of Mormon genealogy practice, the most important of the new revelations made to Smith and his followers – and it could be argued the most significant revelation in the Mormon faith – concerned the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and the mission of the restored Church. According to Mormon tradition, the prophet Elijah appeared to Smith and Cowdery in April 1836 to fulfill the prophecy spoken at the end of the biblical book of Malachi: “And [Elijah] shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.”<sup>95</sup> According to Smith, Elijah told them that the time of which Malachi spoke was here – that the “great and dreadful day of the Lord is near” – and that the Church was responsible for enacting the prophecy, for “turning the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of children to their fathers.”<sup>96</sup> One outcome of this prophecy was the Mormon practice of baptism of the dead.

Baptism was considered a vital ritual, necessary for salvation. Baptism, of course, was a common practice among most religious faiths descended from Judaism.<sup>97</sup> What was not common was Smith’s claim that baptism could be extended to those no longer living by letting another person stand in for the deceased. The doctrine concerning baptism of the dead unfolded over a number of years: in August 1840 Smith taught that deceased ancestors who may have accepted the gospel if they had heard it when alive

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<sup>94</sup> Klaus J. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 28.

<sup>95</sup> Malachi 4: 5-6, quoted in Donald Harman Akenson, *Some Family*, 51.

<sup>96</sup> James B. Allen, Jessie L. Embry, Kahlile B. Mehr, “Hearts Turned to the Fathers,” special issue, *BYU Studies* 34.2 (1994-1995): 17.

<sup>97</sup> Donald Harman Akenson, *Some Family*, 50.

could be baptized vicariously by family members; in January 1841 Smith revealed that baptisms could only be performed in the temple then under construction in Nauvoo and completed in November 1841; and Smith further taught that records needed to be kept of the baptisms and witnesses present.<sup>98</sup>

The doctrine of salvation for the dead is indicative of the Church's generous reading of the Christian gospel. The Latter-day Saints take a liberal view of salvation, wrote the leading early and mid-twentieth century expositor of Mormon doctrine, Joseph Fielding Smith. While other Christians maintain a "faith-only theory of salvation" or believe that one loses all opportunity for salvation if one dies without accepting Jesus as savior, the Saints "hold out hope that all may be saved" and that the "Lord intends to save all the workmanship of his hands, save those few" – "sons of perdition" – "who will not receive salvation" at all.<sup>99</sup> And this includes all who died without hearing or receiving the gospel, for whatever reason. As evidence of the possibility for redemption of the dead, Fielding Smith pointed to the example of Jesus, whom the apostle Peter reported preached to the dead between the time of his crucifixion and resurrection.<sup>100</sup> Of course

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<sup>98</sup> Some scholars have suggested that considering the high child mortality rate in 1830s and 40s America, baptism of the dead likely had a strong resonance and value. "The natural impulse in a society where childhood deaths were common," writes Donald Akenson, "was for adults to freeze out their vulnerable children emotionally." Baptism of the dead was as much about ancestors as it was about the well being of descendents. See Donald Harman Akenson, *Some Family*, 51-53 and Klaus J. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 104-105.

<sup>99</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *Salvation Universal* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1920), 8. I am using a pamphlet version of Fielding Smith's *Salvation Universal*. The piece was originally published in the February 1910 *Improvement Era* magazine but reappeared numerous times over the in later decades, including both the 1912 and 1924 version of the Genealogical Society of Utah genealogy handbooks and as late as 1971 in the Church's *Ensign* magazine, when Fielding Smith was serving as Church president.

<sup>100</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *Salvation Universal*, 14-15. The teaching that Jesus preached to the dead prior to his resurrection was given official Church sanction in 1918 when Fielding Smith's father, then Church President Joseph F. Smith, received a "revelation" confirming this piece of Christian lore to be factual.

this does not mean that the dead attain salvation without complying with the “principles of the gospel,” including the requirement of baptism. Since the dead “cannot be baptized in water” or “have hands laid upon them,” it is necessary that these rites be performed vicariously for them.<sup>101</sup>

Fielding Smith provided numerous biblical examples to justify the Mormon belief in proxy baptism to his readers. For instance, the ancient Israelites transferred the sins of the people onto a scapegoat then sent the sins (and the goat) into the wilderness. In fact, argued Fielding Smith, the “whole plan of redemption is based on vicarious salvation,” with Jesus standing in for the “whole human family,” paying the penalty for Adam’s original sin. Considering these examples, “why should it be considered a strange thing for the Later-day Saints [*sic*] to believe that the children have the privilege of standing vicariously for their dead fathers, and by proxy perform these ordinances, that belong to this life, in their behalf?”<sup>102</sup>

The salvation of the dead, however, did not end with proxy baptism but included binding – or sealing, in Mormon parlance – the living and dead into eternal family units. In July 1843, Smith revealed to the Saints that bonds such as covenants, oaths, etc., including marriage, are temporary unless “sealed by the Holy Spirit.” A husband and wife sealed in a temple marriage ceremony were united together in eternity rather than “until death do you part.” The sealing ordinance also applied to entire families, living and dead, which could be “sealed” together throughout time.<sup>103</sup> In the eyes of the Latter-day Saints, sealing ordinances represent a fundamental component in turning the “heart

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<sup>101</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *Salvation Universal*, 8-10.

<sup>102</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *Salvation Universal*, 10-12.

<sup>103</sup> Donald Harman Akenson, *Some Family*, 11.



of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers.”<sup>104</sup> Fielding Smith wrote, “Our salvation cannot be accomplished unless the fathers and the children are joined together, bound, sealed in perfect family order.” Husbands and wives, parents and children, all must be linked together “until there is one grand family composed of all the faithful from the beginning to the end of time.”<sup>105</sup>

Finally, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints holds that it alone has the power and is therefore responsible for bringing about universal salvation. “How great is the responsibility of the Latter-day Saints,” Fielding Smith exclaimed, “for upon the Saints devolves the labor of this universal redemption.”<sup>106</sup> The Saints have a “world-responsibility,” wrote John A. Widtsoe. “We declare to the world that through us, because we possess the priesthood, all the world will be saved.”<sup>107</sup> “The work of saving the dead has practically been reserved for the dispensation of the fullness of times, when the Lord shall restore all things,” wrote Fielding Smith. It is the “duty of the Latter-day Saints to see that it is accomplished.”<sup>108</sup> The responsibility for universal salvation, conferred by God upon the Latter-day Saints, defined the difference, in the Church’s eyes, between themselves and others. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, genealogy provided the Saints with a method of establishing the existence of human beings capable of salvation and visualizing the organization of the “grand family of man.”

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<sup>104</sup> Paul V. Hyer, “Temple Sealings,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism, Volume 3*, ed. Daniel W. Ludlow (New York: MacMillan, 1992): 1289.

<sup>105</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *Salvation Universal*, 28.

<sup>106</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *Salvation Universal*, 28.

<sup>107</sup> John A. Widtsoe, “The Meaning and Importance of Records,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 11 (July 1920): 97.

<sup>108</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *Salvation Universal*, 18.

## **Emergence of Modern Mormon Genealogy and the Genealogical Society of Utah**

Modern Mormon genealogy began in 1894 when church leadership drew a clear connection between temple work – baptizing the dead, conducting family sealing ordinances for deceased family members – and genealogy, the process of researching one’s ancestors and ordering this information into family units. Prior to the dedication of the Salt Lake City Temple in April 1893, sealing ordinances were generally limited to the first generation beyond the first family member to join the church while baptisms were generally administered to one’s living family and deceased parents. At this time, it was customary for a family to be “adopted,” i.e. sealed, to the family of a prominent church leader. As a result, most church members did not make concerted efforts to organize the names of their ancestors into family units and tracing one’s own ancestry past a couple of generations was relatively unimportant.<sup>109</sup> “To an outside observer [adoption] is merely bad genealogy,” writes historian and critic Donald Akenson, but to Church President Wilford Woodruff adoptions amounted to “bad doctrine.”<sup>110</sup> Adoptions raised a theological question: How were eternal families organized if persons were being adopted into other families? The result was a new revelation to Woodruff in April 1894: Mormons should not be adopted into other families but rather seal their own families together throughout time. The 1894 Woodruff revelation demanded a greater

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<sup>109</sup> James B. Allen et. al., “Hearts Turned to the Fathers,” 42. This is not to say there were not avid Mormon genealogists prior to 1894. Allen et. al. make note of individuals such as Orsen Pratt, Wilford Woodruff, and Franklin D. Richards – whose genealogy library became the foundation for today’s Family History Library – as examples of Church members devoted to genealogy. Additionally, conducting genealogy research for others was considered an acceptable missionary activity. Embry reports that “between 1885 and 1900 at least 178 Saints served as genealogical missionaries.” Jessie L. Embry, “Missionaries for the Dead: The Story of the Genealogical Missionaries of the Nineteenth Century,” *BYU Studies* 17 (Spring 1977): 356.

<sup>110</sup> Donald Harman Akenson, *Some Family*, 63.

commitment on the part of Mormons to “collecting and organizing accurate family records.”<sup>111</sup>

The 1894 Woodruff revelation occurred in the context of a series of actions on the part of the federal government to exert control over the Mormon dominated Utah territory and a broader effort by the Church to align the Saints with dominant American mores. Following the move to Utah in 1846, the Latter-day Saints created an enclosed community in which church and state were essentially one. At the forefront of controversy following the Civil War was the Mormon practice of plural marriage, better known as polygamy. The federal government eventually intervened in the Utah territory, passing a number of laws intended to exercise control over the Saints. The Morrill Act of 1862 was an anti-bigamy measure. The 1874 Poland Act made the federal courts the exclusive judicial authority. The 1882 Edmonds Act authorized the president to appoint a new governor and administration for the territory. Finally, the 1887 Edmunds-Tucker Act dissolved the Mormon Church and confiscated its property. The Edmunds-Tucker Act brought economic hardship as the Church was forced to borrow money outside of Utah to continue operating. And ever in the distance, for the Latter-day Saints, lay the possibility of statehood and a return to local control.<sup>112</sup>

In the 1890s, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints hierarchy took steps to alter the Church’s relationship to the federal government and the image of the Saints, which one commentator said consisted of “bearded polygamist, bearded polygamist,

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<sup>111</sup> James B. Allen et. al., “Hearts Turned to the Father,” 42-43; Donald Harman Akenson, *Some Family*, 63-64.

<sup>112</sup> Donald Harman Akenson, *Some Family*, 60-61; Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 5.

bearded polygamist.”<sup>113</sup> The benchmark for the Church’s shifting relationship to American society and culture was the abandonment of plural marriage in September 1890. Additionally, throughout the 1890s, the majority of Latter-day Saints chose to align themselves with the Republican Party then dominating American politics and began opening their communities to outside economic development.<sup>114</sup> Thomas Alexander wrote in his history of this period of transition within the Church that “Mormons began groping for a new paradigm that would save essential characteristics of their religious tradition, provide sufficient political stability to preserve the interests of the church, and allow them to live in peace with other Americans.” This required the abandonment of some practices, such as plural marriage, and a recovery and reemphasis on neglected aspects of the Mormon religious tradition, such as health regulations and temple work, while also incorporating aspects of dominant American culture, such as “recreational and athletic activities for young people within a church setting.”<sup>115</sup> Genealogy provided a significant link to the Church’s religious traditions while emphasizing a practice then gaining acceptance within dominant culture.<sup>116</sup>

The Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU) was established in November 1894 in the wake of Woodruff’s revelation concerning the importance of tracing one’s own family lineage and sealing one’s own family together in the temple. While not created as a division of the Church, the GSU was, for all practical purposes, the primary

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<sup>113</sup> Ken Verdoia in *The Mormons*, part two, PBS, 2007, <<http://www.pbs.org/mormons/>> (accessed June 2010).

<sup>114</sup> Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 7, 11.

<sup>115</sup> Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 14.

<sup>116</sup> See Donald Harman Akenson, *Some Family*, 63. Akenson’s explains the new fascination as a redirection of energy in Mormon culture, away from unacceptable practices such as plural marriage, toward acceptable practices. I am not prepared to make a cause / effect claim about the reemphasis on genealogy in the church in the 1890s, as I see the genealogy practice of the church following from the logic of their theology.

advocacy group for genealogical work in the Church.<sup>117</sup> The GSU had precedents in church history, for example the Latter-day Saints' Genealogical Bureau, established in 1888. But with the support of the Church – and its renewed focus on temple work – the GSU succeeded whereas the Genealogical Bureau never really took off. The GSU articles of association stated three purposes for the society: the benevolent purpose of collecting and housing genealogical material, the educational purpose of teaching others the methods for tracing ancestors, and the religious purpose of helping Latter-day Saints prepare papers for temple work. The GSU membership was not limited to Church members but was rather open to all persons of “good moral character.”<sup>118</sup>

### **Genealogy as a Collective Project for the Saints**

The *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine (UGHM)*, the communication vehicle for the Genealogical Society of Utah, was first published in January 1910. Its purpose, wrote Anthon Lund, president of the GSU, was to provide a “periodical of permanent usefulness” that will “instruct and aid in the gathering of records” of the dead. Furthermore, the *UGHM* will fill in a significant gap in genealogical knowledge, for while there are numerous genealogical societies and libraries in the Eastern United States and even in Europe, there is only the GSU in the West. Therefore the magazine would focus on the records of pioneer families in the Rocky Mountain region of the country.<sup>119</sup>

Part instruction manual, part history book, part doctrinal reinforcement, the publication

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<sup>117</sup> Other Church associations contributed to the promotion of genealogy in Mormon society and culture. The Women's Relief Society took an active role in “getting the genealogical program into the homes of Church members.” The Daughters of Utah Pioneers was a heredity-based society which urged members to collect and preserve genealogical materials. Susa Young Gates played an active role in both groups. James B. Allen et. al., “Hearts Turned to the Fathers,” 59, 62.

<sup>118</sup> James B. Allen et. al., “Hearts Turned to the Fathers,” 45-47.

<sup>119</sup> Anthon H. Lund, “The Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 1, no. 1 (January 1910): 21-22.

included family histories, articles on how to conduct research in the United States and Europe, details concerning what sorts of records were available, pieces on Church history, reports from missions around the world, etc.<sup>120</sup> The *UGHM* was one means by which the Church shaped the discourse about the meaning of genealogy and its significance in the lives of the Saints. Through the discourse produced in its pages, the *UGHM* conjured up an imagined community of responsibility, which solicited the participation of the Saints.

“Every well-informed, consistent Latter-day Saint should believe in genealogy as much as he believes in faith, repentance, and baptism for the remission of sins; and this belief,” wrote Nephi Anderson, “should be manifested in works, the same as belief in baptism, tithing, or any other gospel principle is shown to be genuine by its fulfillment in actual practice.”<sup>121</sup> Anderson’s 1911 address to the Genealogical Society of Utah, “Genealogy’s Place in the Plan of Salvation,” became a basic text for the Society, reprinted multiple times in its publications. Anderson’s address conveyed the Society’s and the Church’s message that genealogy played a fundamental role in salvation history as the practical component between the doctrine of salvation for the dead and the performance of temple ordinances. Anderson’s address explained to the Saints the significance of genealogy for the Church and individual members, and it illustrates the themes that dominated the discussion of genealogy in the *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* and other Mormon publications in the early decades of the twentieth century. Anderson and others made the argument that persons in the spirit world could

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<sup>120</sup> James B. Allen et. al., “Hearts Turned to the Fathers,” 73.

<sup>121</sup> Nephi Anderson, “Genealogy’s Place in the Plan of Salvation,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 3 (January 1912): 12.

only be saved and families could only be sealed together if those persons and family relationships were clearly identified. Once the appropriate facts were secured – i.e. dates of birth and of death, where a person lived, to whom she / he is related – “proper records can be made, and the binding together can be accomplished,” Anderson said.

On one level, genealogy was treated in the discourse as a collective project for the Latter-day Saints on par with the Church’s other missionary activities. As if to counter those who thought genealogy was a self-centered pursuit designed to mark social distinction – and maybe with patriotic heredity-based societies in mind – Anderson asserted, “All selfishness is elimited [*sic*] from the work for the dead. One soul is as precious as another, and all should have an equal chance for salvation.”<sup>122</sup> When a member of the Church is called for missionary work in a foreign nation, the question is never raised as to whether “it is useless for him to go there to preach because his relatives did not come from there” or because he is “preaching the gospel among those who are strangers or aliens.” Then why, asked Fielding Smith, do Church members question the usefulness of joining the Genealogical Society of Utah or subscribing to its periodical? The Genealogical Society stands equally with other organizations in the Church, asserted Fielding Smith, and should be supported in its work for the salvation of the dead regardless of its direct benefit to oneself. Like Christ Himself who took on the sins of all people, Fielding Smith said, we should “be willing to do something also for the benefit of the human race, whether we can trace our genealogy back or not.”<sup>123</sup> Likewise Anderson asked, “does it matter just who are benefited” by the Genealogical Society? Speaking to

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<sup>122</sup> Nephi Anderson, “Genealogy’s Place in the Plan of Salvation,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 3 (January 1912): 21.

<sup>123</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, “The Unselfishness of Temple Work,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 3 (July 1912): 118-120.

Saints living outside of Salt Lake City, Anderson argued everyone can play a part in universal salvation. While you may not be able to access the Society's resources personally, said Anderson, "your membership will allow others to do so."<sup>124</sup>

The *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* and other Mormon publications of the period situated the collective genealogy project of the Latter-day Saints as part of a larger, world-historical movement, the "Spirit of Elijah" on earth. The "spirit of his mission," wrote Fielding Smith, has taken "hold of the hearts of the honorable men and women in the world who have been directed, they know not why, to spend their time and means in preparation of genealogies, vital records and various other genealogical data."<sup>125</sup> For instance, Thomas Bicknell's inner urge to produce a family history, Dr. Young implied, resulted from the "Spirit of Elijah" at work in the world. Anderson and others pointed to the founding of genealogical societies, such the New England Historic Genealogical Society in 1845 and the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society in 1869, and the growth of genealogical libraries around the country, such as the Newberry Library in Chicago, as evidence of the "Spirit of Elijah" moving the hearts of men. The "Spirit of Elijah" was evidenced by the increasing number of genealogy-oriented periodicals and newspaper columns devoted to ancestor hunting. The mission of Elijah was also evident in legislation calling for the collection of vital statistics in the United States and England.<sup>126</sup> "Because their hearts have been drawn out to their

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<sup>124</sup> Nephi Anderson, "Genealogy's Place in the Plan of Salvation," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 3 (January 1912): 21.

<sup>125</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *Salvation Universal*, 22; see also Joseph F. Smith, Untitled, *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 3 (October 1912): 160.

<sup>126</sup> Nephi Anderson, "Genealogy's Place in the Plan of Salvation," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 3 (January 1912): 17-18; also "The Spirit of Elijah," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 4 (July 1913): 107-108; B. F. Cummings, "Genealogy and the Spirit of Elijah," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 7 (April 1916): 69-72.



fathers,” Fielding Smith wrote, people of the world are “energetically and faithfully laboring, but all the while unconscious of the full significance and worth of their labors.”<sup>127</sup>

In contrast to the limited vision of the Daughters of the American Revolution and other patriotic heredity-based societies, the Genealogical Society of Utah and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints expressed a global vision in their discourse. The journal highlighted research efforts in Europe and other locations where the Church performed missionary work. The GSU kept agents in many European countries who provided research assistance and reported on available resources and research conditions outside of United States.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, the journal sought to provide information for Saints seeking to do research outside of Utah and outside the United States. Susa Young Gates reported back on her trips with Elizabeth McCune to the Newberry Library in Chicago and Somerset House in London and the difficulties they faced finding and using resources in Montreal, Canada and Cassel, Germany.<sup>129</sup> Historians James B. Allen, Jessie Embry, and Kahlile B. Mehr note a number of ethnic-oriented ancillary genealogical societies. The Lamanite Society, founded in 1918 and disbanded in 1926, sought to gather genealogical records for Mormons of Native American ancestry. A Polynesian Department was established by the Genealogical Society of Utah in 1937 after

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<sup>127</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *Salvation Universal*, 24.

<sup>128</sup> For example, Jen Jensen, “The Means for Genealogical Research in Scandinavia,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 2 (January 1911): 19-22; or George Minns, “Difficulties in British Research,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 5 (January 1914): 30-31.

<sup>129</sup> Susa Young Gates, “Genealogists Abroad,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 5 (July 1914): 125-133; see also Susa Young Gates, “Going Abroad for Genealogy: United States,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 5 (April 1914): 88-91 for information regarding the New York Genealogical Library, the New England Genealogical Library, and the Library of Congress.

solicitation by members of the Hawaiian Temple and missionaries among Polynesian islands.<sup>130</sup>

Descriptions of the “Spirit of Elijah” by GSU leaders and articles in the *UGHM* offered readers a framework for interpreting their personal research experience, a framework which sometimes resulted in testimonies of divine intervention in the process of assembling a genealogy. The *Deseret Evening News* article described at the beginning of this section offers a subtle example of genealogical testimony. Dr. Young noted Bicknell’s confusion over what drove him to pursue his family history, implying to readers that they – Dr. Young and other Mormons – completely understood the motivating force behind Bicknell’s research. A more explicit example appeared in the pages of the *UGHM*. Solomon Kimball wrote of the “embittered” feelings towards Heber C. Kimball by his family following the elder Kimball’s decision to join the Church. This prevented the elder Kimball from securing anything from the family that “would lead to the discovery of his ancestry, placing him in the humiliating position of not even knowing the name of his grandfather.” But a “glorious spirit seemed to permeate the minds of the whole family” following the elder Kimball’s death, wrote Solomon Kimball. Various family members, unbeknownst to one another, began working on the family history of Heber C. Kimball, resulting in the production of an ancestry that included nearly 14,000 names. “The spiritual-minded members of the Kimball family of this intermountain region believe that their illustrious father” was partially responsible for bringing the genealogical history together.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> James B. Allen et. al., “Hearts Turned to the Fathers,” 155-156.

<sup>131</sup> Solomon Kimball, “How the Ancestry of Herber C. Kimball was Obtained,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 4 (January 1913): 43-45.

The discourse produced by the *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* and leaders of the Genealogical Society of Utah described genealogy as a collective project but sought to interpellate individual Saints into that collective project by also treating genealogy as the individual Saint's obligation and responsibility to her / his ancestors. Church president Joseph F. Smith warned readers to "Look up your genealogies." Wrote Smith, "You will soon meet those who look to you for their salvation," and you will not want your lack of diligence to lead to regret in the spirit world.<sup>132</sup> Likewise Charles Penrose told his audience on "Genealogical Sunday" that the day we meet our "departed" friends and family will be "glorious" but "how sorrowful we shall feel when we get there, if we have to go and preach to them and they tell us that we might have done something for them if we had only had the disposition."<sup>133</sup> Inspiration will not save the dead, asserted Susa Young Gates. "We must also have information in order to consummate that noble work." Everyone has a role to play, Gates wrote; "unless the Saints learn how to secure and prepare genealogical information – not a few of them, but the vast majority of them – [the Genealogical Society's] library and the temples will languish and the work will be halted."<sup>134</sup> James E. Talmage spoke of the "privilege of those who come in at the door themselves to hold that door open to admit others." Talmage rejected talk of one's independence from others. "No man is independent," he said. "We are all inter-

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<sup>132</sup> Joseph F. Smith, "Look Up Your Genealogies," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 3 (July 1912): 111.

<sup>133</sup> Charles W. Penrose, "Salvation for the Dead," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 4 (January 1913): 18.

<sup>134</sup> Susa Young Gates, "Inspiration Versus Information," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 9 (July 1918): 132.

dependent; and we shall only rise as we carry others with us, and as we are assisted by others.”<sup>135</sup>

### **Producing a Genealogy in Preparation for Temple Work**

So how should the responsible Saint proceed to compile a genealogy and thereby participate in the Church’s mission of universal salvation? The “Lessons in Genealogy,” edited by Susa Young Gates, were meant to provide the individual Saint with the knowledge and skills necessary for locating and identifying their ancestors and then organizing this information into a form appropriate for temple work. The “Lessons in Genealogy” appeared in the *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* between October 1911 and April 1913 and were published in book form with Fielding Smith’s “Salvation Universal” and Anderson’s “Genealogy’s Place in the Plan of Salvation” in 1912. The lessons emerged from courses offered by the Women’s Committee of the Genealogical Society of Utah in Salt Lake City, Provo, and Logan, Utah over the previous two years.<sup>136</sup> Lessons covered general information, such as what materials were needed to conduct research – a notebook, a pencil, the “very best ink made” – types of evidence and commonly used reference books but also took up Mormons-specific concerns as well, including how to prepare records for temple work, assigning an heir to the temple record, and what should be done if no ancestral lines were available for research. The short booklet published in 1912 proved so popular that a second edition was printed the following year.<sup>137</sup> Gates’ “Lessons in Genealogy” illustrates the process

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<sup>135</sup> James E. Talmage, “Missionary Work in the Spirit World,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 3 (October 1912): 165.

<sup>136</sup> Susa Young Gates, “Lessons in Genealogy – Introduction,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 2 (October 1911): 163.

<sup>137</sup> James B. Allen et. al., “Hearts Turned to the Fathers,” 70.

of Mormon genealogical knowledge production and provide insight into the Church's and the Genealogical Society of Utah's preferred meaning of ancestral knowledge.

According to the "Lessons in Genealogy," genealogy research serves to establish the existence of a once living person who may then be submitted as an object of salvation during temple rites. "To the Saints," wrote Gates, "the names of their ancestors are as vital as the means of identification for vicarious salvation as are the names and individualities of the living."<sup>138</sup> In another context, Gates wrote, "Vital statistics, or recorded genealogical data, determine the individuality of the symbolized dead." This data – on the written page, the tombstone, "or upon the lip of some speaker" – wrote Gates, is the "tabernacle of the departed spirit."<sup>139</sup> Therefore, it is imperative that the genealogist keep to the facts and maintain accuracy at all times. "What is not ascertained from printed records, or authentic manuscripts must be left out or set down as tradition or probability," wrote Gates.<sup>140</sup> While family tradition may provide clues for pursuing other forms of evidence, it is not sufficient evidence itself for establishing the existence of an individual."<sup>141</sup>

Like the patriotic heredity-based societies, the Mormons treated records as evidence of a person's existence. What distinguished the Saints from their contemporaries on this point was *what* the evidence indicates. For the patriotic-heredity based societies, records revealed information about a living person, about a person's

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<sup>138</sup> Susa Young Gates, "Lessons in Genealogy – Introduction," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 2 (October 1911): 164.

<sup>139</sup> Susa Young Gates, ed., *Surname Book and Racial History* (Salt Lake City: General Board of the Relief Society, with the approval of the Board of the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1918), vi.

<sup>140</sup> Susa Young Gates, "Lessons in Genealogy – The Genealogist at Work – Approximating Dates and Method of Recording," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 3 (January 1912): 23.

<sup>141</sup> Susa Young Gates, "Lessons in Genealogy – The Genealogist at Work – Material and Sources of Information," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 2 (October 1911): 166.

ownership of the national story and that person's public rights and social obligations to protect the principles of the Revolutionary patriots against various dangers – e.g. excessive materialism, immigration – which threatened their value in American society and culture. Records provide evidence of an existing chain of action, from one's patriot ancestor to oneself. For the Saints, records themselves were a manifestation of a departed "spirit." Records conjured up, made visible, the deceased for the purposes of temple ordinances; they created the pieces of the chain which genealogy would serve to link together across the "veil" of death. The creation of an *eternal* bond rested on evidence which established the existence of a departed ancestor to whom one could be sealed. For the DAR, ancestral knowledge conferred personal obligations to perpetuate the principles of the Revolution. For the Mormons, on the other hand, ancestral knowledge conjured up a departed person for whom the Saint was responsible.

Considering the significance of establishing the identities of the deceased in the spirit world, creating names out of thin air was considered a major violation of trust, harmful to the Church's religious mission. Fielding Smith highlighted the dangers of those "individuals in the world who manufacture names so that they can complete unbroken a family line." Such "wickedness" disrupts the process of salvation; "Remember," wrote Fielding Smith, "it is out of the [genealogical] records [created on earth] that the dead are to be judged," therefore Saints should strive for accuracy and orderliness in their genealogical work and family records.<sup>142</sup> Gates warned: "no manufactured names may be accepted in the temples erected to the name of Israel's

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<sup>142</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *Salvation Universal*, 32.

God.”<sup>143</sup> The dead will be judged according to the temple records produced from genealogy research. “Let our record here be written well and firmly,” exhorted Widtsoe, “so that the record on the other side may be correct for us and for ours.”<sup>144</sup>

Once ancestors have been accurately identified, they were to be organized into family units and generationally, beginning with the oldest ancestors. The Genealogical Society of Utah chose to adopt the format developed by the New England Historic Genealogical Society for the *New England Historic Genealogical Register* of uniquely numbering all persons in a genealogy and grouping persons by generation.<sup>145</sup> The process begins with the oldest known male ancestor, who is labeled #1, and his wife, who is labeled #2. Their children, identified only by their “Christian” names and in order of birth, are number 3, 4, and so on. A Mormon family record may include more than “blood” relatives. While the sealing ordinance is completed for parents and children, noted Richard B. Summerhays, “mother ‘is an in-law’ so far as that family line is concerned, and it is necessary to take into consideration her family, where she is recorded as a child, in order to properly complete the work.”<sup>146</sup>

Once the genealogy has been numbered, it was still inadequate for the purposes of temple work. First, an heir must be assigned to the family record. The heir indicates the person under whose direction or approval the names are submitted for temple ordinances. Duncan A. McAllister, register at the Salt Lake City Temple, noted in his contribution to “Lessons in Genealogy” that as a rule, the “eldest living male representative of a family”

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<sup>143</sup> Susa Young Gates, “Lessons in Genealogy – Method of Recording,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 3 (April 1912): 77.

<sup>144</sup> John A. Widtsoe, “The Meaning and Importance of Records,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, 11 (July 1920): 99.

<sup>145</sup> “The Plan for Genealogies,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 4 (April 1913): 92.

<sup>146</sup> Richard B. Summerhays, “Identification,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 15 (July 1924): 117.

who is a member of the Church “is the recognized heir.” Should this “proper representative” neglect to take an active role in preparing names for temple work, either delaying or withholding consent, “Every effort should be made, in kindness, to get him to perform his duty.” If the entreaty comes to naught, wrote McAllister, then the “next eldest male” should step in. If there is no male representative available, then the duty falls to the “eldest female representative.”<sup>147</sup> The purpose of assigning an heir was to systematize temple work and avoid duplication of the ordinances.

In preparing a temple record form, persons in the genealogy were to be arranged into family groups and the relationship of the heir to the deceased must be stated, i.e. the heir is the nephew of so-and-so, the heir is great-grandson of so-and-so. Gates suggested using a pedigree chart to begin the process of determining relationships between persons in the genealogy.<sup>148</sup> Additionally, McAllister laid out some guidelines in “Lessons in Genealogy” for which names should be included for temple work. McAllister stated that “as a general rule,” one should limit temple work to “individuals of their own blood kindred or to personal friends,” in other words to people with whom you have a personal, though not necessarily “blood,” relationship. Additionally, one may submit names of relatives by marriage for temple ordinances. Generally a person should limit himself / herself to four family lines, that of one’s paternal and maternal grandparents. However, “even though you may be unable to ascertain the exact relationship,” it is “reasonable to assume that all bearing the surnames of your four family lines residing in the same locality were your relatives.” The purposes of these restrictions were to minimize

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<sup>147</sup> Duncan M. McAllister, “Lessons in Genealogy – Heirship in Temple Work,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 3 (April 1912): 80-81.

<sup>148</sup> Susa Young Gates, “Lessons in Genealogy – Diagramming Pedigrees,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 4 (April 1913): 99.



“endless confusion and repetition” in temple work. Finally, McAllister wrote, “you must always state your relationship to each one of the dead individuals, not their relationship to you.” If one cannot state the degree of relationship, the deceased may be labeled as “Relative”; if no family relationship exists, the deceased may be labeled “Friend.”<sup>149</sup>

The completed family and temple records amounted to a visualized representation of links in a chain. Actually, this is not quite an accurate description as the final genealogical record appears more like a web of relationships. Unlike the genealogical record stated on the application form for the Daughters of the American Revolution, the objectified relationships presented in the family and temple records produced through genealogy research did not signify the transmission of “blood” or a legacy from an ancestor to a descendent but rather the organization of an ever-present family made up of “blood” relatives, in-laws, and “friends” and “welded” together for eternity. In contrast to the DAR’s belief that evidence of “blood” lineage was evidence of a transmission of character traits from patriot ancestor to descendent, in the Mormon case, heredity was not the defining qualification for membership in the family network. The language the Saints used to describe the outcome of the sealing ordinance was not unique to the early decades of the twentieth century. Joseph Smith himself used the phrase “welding link” to describe the type of bond necessary to prevent the earth from being “smitten with a curse,” and the phrase was often repeated in Mormon discourse.<sup>150</sup> Gates also spoke of “chains.” In the process of compiling a genealogy, the Saint weaved a “perfect chain of ancestry” back “several hundred years,” and she noted the importance of dating when the

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<sup>149</sup> Duncan M. McAllister, “Lessons in Genealogy – Limitations in Temple Work,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 3 (April 1912): 81-82.

<sup>150</sup> Doc. & Cov. 128: 15, 18, quoted in Nephi Anderson, “Genealogy’s Place in the Plan of Salvation,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 3 (January 1912): 16.

research process began, as the “date will make a historical link in the chain” the Saint is “seeking to weave around himself and his dead.”<sup>151</sup> Gates’ suggestion to mark the date when research began makes the genealogy and family record both a temporal document as well as an other-worldly representation of eternal social bonds.

### **Genealogy in the Context of Salvation History**

As a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the individual Saint was invited to interpret his / her own genealogy in the context of the Saints’ religious mission and therefore in the context of both earth-time (temporal) history and salvation history. Genealogy and family history “grounded” an individual Saint in historic time and place as well as in an unfolding divine mission. In locating their ancestors, wrote Adolph Ramseyer, the Saints found a “true place in the grand family of our Father.” One link “can be linked to others, until the chain is eventually complete, and our genealogy, like Jesus’, can be traced back to Adam who was a son of God.”<sup>152</sup> The Saints should take a “broader view of the work of the dead,” beyond their own family lines, though this is their first duty, Summerhays encouraged. If genealogical work is done correctly, wrote Summerhays, “what is accomplished by one person will fit in perfectly with what is done by another.” Through “co-operation and mutual helpfulness,” cross references between genealogies will provide a “means of developing a universal pedigree that will be easily accessible and readily understood.”<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Susa Young Gates, “Lessons in Genealogy – The Genealogist at Work – Material and Sources of Information,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 2 (October 1911): 166-167.

<sup>152</sup> A. Adolph Ramseyer, “Ancestors and Posterity,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 1 (October 1910): 184.

<sup>153</sup> Richard B. Summerhays, “Identification,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 15 (July 1924): 118. Donald Akenson argues convincingly against the Mormon genealogy project of creating a universal human pedigree in *Some Family*. Akenson treats genealogy as essentially a form of narrative and argues that there are multiple forms of the genealogical narrative,

What might it have meant for the individual Saint to locate himself / herself and family members in the “grand family of our Father”? What cultural tools were available to the individual Saint to make sense of the larger temporal and geographic “chain” in which he / she was meant to locate himself / herself? The Mormon worldview in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was, like much of the United States, one of racial hierarchies and favored lineages, though little in the *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* provides direct evidence for this worldview.<sup>154</sup> To understand the temporal and salvation history into which the genealogy of the individual Saint was grafted requires a brief sojourn into secondary literature addressing these elements of Mormon thought. It is important to remember that for the Saints, temporal history and salvation history were not separate things. Rather, one cognitive framework was interpreted in light of the other – temporal history read in terms of salvation history and salvation

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including not only the Western standard of bilineal ascent, following both the father’s and mother’s lines of ancestry, but also matrilineal and patrilineal versions. The Mormons attempt to squeeze every culture into the bilineal system when this is simply not how many cultures constructed their genealogical narratives (and records). Akenson takes offense at the biological aspects of the Mormon project as well, including the ideas of chosen lineages and races which will be discussed below. Without a doubt, the Mormon scheme includes this biological component. However, the Mormon model is of particular interest to me because I think that – absent its bio-racialist elements described below, which I believe are particularly stressed in formulations of the *entire* “grand family of man” – the Mormon model of genealogy may have much to offer contemporary thinking about the process of genealogy and its potential for self and social identity formation.

<sup>154</sup> The most revelatory primary source for the Mormon worldview during the early decades of the twentieth century is Joseph Fielding Smith’s *The Way to Perfection*, originally published in 1931. Fielding Smith’s preface situates the work in relationship to the activities of the Genealogical Society of Utah. Fielding Smith describes the book as a “faith-promoting discussion of doctrinal principles and historical themes which justify the large place salvation for the living and the dead occupies in the life of every Latter-day Saint.” *The Way to Perfection* was written, its author states, “not only for study by genealogical workers, but for general use throughout the Church.” Sociologist Armand L. Mauss notes, “Whatever the extent of Joseph Fielding Smith’s doctrinal influence by mid-century, his teachings could hardly be regarded as heterodox, for nearly all of his colleagues in the church leadership and most of the general membership embraced similar ideas.” Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 31.

history read into temporal history, e.g. the “spirit of Elijah” evidenced by the growth of genealogical societies.

During the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century, the Church taught members that the Latter-day Saints were literal descendents of Israel in America, primarily from the “lost tribe” of Ephraim. Sociologist Armand L. Mauss argues in *All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* that the notion of Mormons as Israelites emerged early in Church history, a synthesis of Latter-day Saints scripture – including the *Book of Mormon* and “Book of Abraham” – and two outside influences, British Israelism and myths of Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic superiority. British Israelism refers to the idea that the lost tribes of Israel migrated to and inter-married with the inhabitants of Europe and that the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh in particular found their way into the British Isles. Mauss also pointed to the secular and more widely held ideas about Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic superiority as a component of the Saints’ Israelite identity, racial thought which had an affinity with ideas of British Israelism.

In conceptualizing the Latter-day Saints as descendents of the ancient Hebrews, Church leaders situated the Latter-day Saints as “chosen” and privileged through shared “blood.” Joseph Fielding Smith taught that Joseph Smith himself was a descendent of the tribe of Ephraim, which is why the “Patriarchal Priesthood was conferred upon him with the commandment that it should be handed down from father to son.”<sup>155</sup> Many of the Israelites, said Fielding Smith, went into captivity before they “fully understood that they were a people separated from the world” and therefore “saw no harm in mixing with

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<sup>155</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1935), 128.

other peoples.”<sup>156</sup> The Latter-day Saints are of mixed heritage and “come to their blessings through the Gentile nations.” The descendents of Ephraim, wrote Fielding Smith, have raised the “Gospel Standard” and are gathering from among the Gentiles and “scattered Israelites among the Gentiles have rallied unto it.”<sup>157</sup> Such statements provide additional context for observations made in the *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* about *where* the “spirit of Elijah” is at work. “In every nation where the blood of Israel has been found more abundantly,” noted Anderson, “the hearts of the children have been turned to their fathers.” While “Germany, Holland, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian Countries” are only beginning to take an interest in records preservation, Anderson reported, in Great Britain the “interest is as keen and as widespread as in the United States.”<sup>158</sup>

Another step in the development of the Mormon racial worldview was the emergence of a belief in pre-mortal existence and lineage assignment beginning in the 1850s. Mauss explained that while Joseph Smith taught in the late 1830s about the “pre-mortal existence of spirit,” he was unclear on whether this pre-mortal existence referred to a time of assigning “mortal roles only on an *individual* basis” or whether “entire *categories* of spirits were set apart for specified mortal *lineages*.” Some of Smith’s successors, argued Mauss, clearly inferred Smith’s teachings as meaning “collective foreordination to lineages and to other mortal circumstances.”<sup>159</sup> Fielding Smith taught that “there was an assignment” of individuals to “tribes and nations” before “earth-life began.” Some “spirits were chosen” in the beginning “to come through the lineage of

<sup>156</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection*, 138.

<sup>157</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection*, 140-141.

<sup>158</sup> Nephi Anderson, “Genealogy’s Place in the Plan of Salvation,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 3 (January 1912): 19.

<sup>159</sup> Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*, 25.

Abraham”<sup>160</sup> Fielding Smith asked: “Is it not a reasonable belief, that the Lord would elect the choice spirits to come through the better grade of nations?” Further: “is it not reasonable to believe the less worthy spirits would come through less favored lineage?” And “Does this not account” for the “various grades of color and degrees of intelligence we find in the earth?”<sup>161</sup>

The Mormon “ethnic” identity as Israelite and as a “chosen lineage” shaped and was equally shaped by its purported differences from other lineage groups. Native Americans and those of black African descent are two primary examples. Mormon religious tradition held – and continues to struggle with the belief – that Native Americans are the descendents of the Lamanite people discussed in the *Book of Mormon*. The *Book of Mormon* explains that the Lamanites and Nephites were descendents of one of the lost tribes of Israel that sailed to the Americas prior to the Babylonian attack and captivity of Israel. The Nephites remained righteous while the Lamanites rebelled against the laws of God. According to the *Book of Mormon*, God punished the Lamanites for their depravity by darkening their skin, therefore providing evidence of a link between skin color and morality.<sup>162</sup> After a period of peace following Jesus’ appearance in the Americas, the Lamanites resumed war against their Nephite brothers, eventually eliminating the Nephites all together. The last remaining Nephite, Moroni, escaped north with the historical records of the Nephite people, which he buried in the area that is now New York; Joseph Smith argued that the *Book of Mormon* represented a translation of the ancient Nephite records.

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<sup>160</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection*, 46.

<sup>161</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection*, 48.

<sup>162</sup> Simon G. Southerton, *Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 8.

The Lamanites, understood as both descendents of Israel and historical players in the plan of salvation, were of considerable interest to the Latter-day Saints. On the one hand, the Native Americans represented part of the “chosen lineage” of Israel called upon to participate in the plan of salvation. On the other hand, the Native Americans were considered a “fallen people” who the Latter-day Saints, as a “favored people,” were charged with bringing back into the fold. In actual fact, the Latter-day Saints and indigenous peoples of the United States had a contentious relationship; Native Americans, in general, rejected the proselytizing efforts of the Latter-day Saints. Over time the resistance of Native Americans to the Mormon message led to a shift in how they were featured and how often in Mormon rhetoric; Mauss noted that over the early decades of the twentieth century, Native Americans were mentioned with much less frequency in general conference sermons as the Latter-day Saints turned their attention to seeking archeological proofs of *Book of Mormon* claims.<sup>163</sup> The existence of the Lamanite Society, a genealogy organization designed to help Native American church members research and prepare their family records, indicates Native American peoples still figured as a concern to some degree in Mormon religious culture during the 1920s.<sup>164</sup> Even contemporary Latter-day Saints of Native American ancestry, as a “direct consequence” of the *Book of Mormon*, “regard the Israelite Lehi, the original Israelite immigrant to the Americas, to be a blood relative.”<sup>165</sup>

Blacks of African descent, in both the United States and abroad, were considered a “cursed lineage” in official Mormon doctrine until 1978, when blacks were allowed

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<sup>163</sup> Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 69.

<sup>164</sup> James B. Allen, et. al., “Hearts Turned to the Fathers,” 155.

<sup>165</sup> Simon G. Southerton, *Losing a Lost Tribe*, 37.

access to the priesthood, a rite and status comparable to the Christian confirmation or Jewish bar mitzvah. Mormon scholars have determined that the ban on black priesthood was not firmly established until after Joseph Smith's death in 1844. Smith, however, likely held the belief that blacks carried the "curse of Cain" and the only Mormon scriptural texts referring to the notion of "cursed lineage" was the "Book of Abraham," which Smith "translated" in 1835. The first official statements concerning the priesthood ban were made in 1852. According to Mauss, three developments over the late nineteenth century solidified the notion of blacks as a "cursed lineage" in Mormon doctrine and religious tradition. First was the canonization of the *Pearl of Great Price*, which included the "Book of Abraham," as official Mormon scripture in 1880. Second, the concept of "pre-mortal existence," discussed above, was elaborated in Church teachings, thereby drawing clearer distinctions between the Latter-day Saints and other peoples. And third, the belief, shared by dominant members of American society, in Anglo-Saxon superiority was incorporated into Mormon religious thinking. Joseph Field Smith encapsulated and popularized these ideas among Mormons in the *Way to Perfection*, published in 1931 by the Genealogical Society of Utah.<sup>166</sup>

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century Mormon racial framework shared some affinities with the bio-racial ideas of mainstream American culture, particularly in terms of expressions of Anglo-Saxon superiority. For example, the geographic areas in which Genealogical Society of Utah leaders found the "Spirit of Elijah" at work – Great Britain, Denmark, Scandinavia, Germany, etc. – were the ancestral homelands of old-stock middle and upper class white Americans and not the points of origin for the newer

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<sup>166</sup> Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 215-217.



waves of immigrants. Furthermore, the notion of temporal and salvation history as being the history of lineage groups paralleled the dominant anthropological view of world history as the evolution of racial groups, with some clearly superior in terms of their development and others inferior. However, noted Mauss, on at least two points “Mormon racialism” was unique. First, the Latter-day Saints had no sympathy with anti-Semitism, and second, the Church took an optimistic view of the future of Native Americans, who the Saints held were ultimately going to be significant players at the end times.<sup>167</sup>

One place in which a Saint’s individual genealogy intersected with the larger framework of chosen racial lineage groups was an interest in understanding the origins of surnames. At some point in genealogical investigation, noted Gates, memory and records cease to provide ways to generate links in the genealogical chain. When this happened, it was necessary to “learn something of the origin and development of our family or tribe.”<sup>168</sup> For this purpose, Gates compiled and published the *Surname Book and Racial History* in 1918. “Surname history lies at the root of genealogy,” wrote Gates, “in exactly the same way that genealogy lies at the root of salvation for the dead.” When written records were no longer available, it was necessary to use one’s surname to locate which branch of humanity your family came from. “If you find your surname originated in England you want to know to what particular race-strain” your family belongs, Gates wrote. “If your progenitors were Normans you next want to know who the Normans were.” Research continues on, further and further back in time until one perhaps comes to one of the tribes of Israel and on back to Adam. It would be impossible, Gates explained, for the “intelligent Latter-day Saint genealogist to carry on a successful

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<sup>167</sup> Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*, 27-28.

<sup>168</sup> Susa Young Gates, *Surname Book and Racial History*, vii.

search” without taking interest in the “origin of his surname, and then of his tribe and the history of the various sub-tribes and divisions which go to make up the peoples of the earth.”<sup>169</sup> Determining the origin of one’s surname enabled the individual Saint to link her / his family history with world history, with the histories of racial groups. However, it should be clear that such a method departed from the imperative to provide evidence and argumentation in genealogy research for the purpose of saving one’s ancestors.

### **Discussion**

During the late 1890s, genealogy became a fundamental part of the Mormon project of universal salvation, used to identify unique souls capable of salvation and to organize and facilitate the creation of eternal social bonds among families. The Genealogical Society of Utah educated Latter-day Saints in the purposes and methods of genealogical research in the *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* and other publications. According to the discourse produced in its pages, records conjured up the departed family member, and genealogies organized loved ones into families sealed together throughout eternity by temple ordinances. Unlike the Daughters of the American Revolution application form, a Mormon genealogy prepared for temple records included all family members and stated relationships from a determined “center,” identified as the heir. Rather than drawing a line from one ancestor to one descendent, Mormon genealogy visualized a web of relationships.

The discourse produced by leaders in the Genealogical Society of Utah indicates that late nineteenth and early twentieth century Mormon genealogy pushed in two directions, conceiving of genealogy as a constructive process but also one intertwined

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<sup>169</sup> Susa Young Gates, *Surname Book and Racial History*, v, vii-viii.

with bio-racialist assumptions. On the one hand, genealogy was conceived of as a constructivist-type practice, one in which individual Saints, through genealogical research, identified the existence of souls in the spirit world with whom they would be joined in an eternal family through temple ordinances. The activity of constructing an eternal family was not circumscribed by heredity. According to leading voices in the Genealogical Society of Utah and articles in the *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, the eternal network of persons sealed together in temple ordinances involved not only “blood” relatives but extended to kin connected through marriage and to close personal friends. Genealogy, in this case, does not *reveal* social bonds between ancestors and descendents but rather provides a way to “weld links” among them. But on the other hand, Mormon genealogy discourse during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was collectively shaped by a framework of racial lineage groups and salvation history, in which particular groups of people have assigned roles to play. Through the activity of genealogy research and temple ordinances, the individual Saint was grafted into salvation history and participates in the historical experience of a people.

The genealogical assumption is employed in Mormon genealogy discourse to locate the individual Saint in multiple “imagined communities.” Mormon genealogy discourse conjures up a community of responsibility. Universal salvation, according to Mormon genealogy discourse, rests on a belief in interdependence between ancestors and descendents; the discourse called upon the Saints to complete their genealogies because the salvation of their ancestors rests upon their doing so. Beyond this, the discourse defined being a responsible Latter-day Saint as supporting genealogy practice among all the Saints just as one would support overseas missionaries, e.g. supporting the genealogy

library. But Mormon genealogy discourse also situated genealogy as a method of locating oneself in the “grand family of man,” an “imagined community” informed by a larger bio-racialist framework. The narrative of salvation history assigned Mormons to a privileged lineage group with the divine responsibility to bring about universal salvation. This lineage group, however, is defined in terms of “blood” descent from the tribe of Ephraim, a child of the Hebrew patriarch Jacob, rather than as something “constructed” through genealogy and temple ordinances.

## 1.4 American Eugenics Movement

### Introduction

“Human genealogy is one of the oldest manifestations of man’s intellectual activity, but until recently it has been subservient to sentimental purposes or pursued from historical or legal motives.” These purposes are of “secondary importance,” claimed Paul Popenoe, editor of the American Genetics Association’s *Journal of Heredity*. Speaking before the first International Congress of Genealogy in 1915, Popenoe argued that genealogy’s greatest worth lay in its “co-operation with biology,” in its potential contribution to research on the laws of heredity and the applied science of eugenics.<sup>170</sup> The eugenics movement, both domestic and international, sought to appropriate genealogy for the purposes of generating data for heredity and eugenics research, public propaganda, and arguments for eugenics oriented legislation. The discourse produced by American eugenics leaders and advocates during the early decades of the twentieth century treated genealogy as an objective scientific method for

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<sup>170</sup> Paul Popenoe, “Genealogy and Eugenics,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 6 (October 1915): 202-203.

generating data regarding human heredity, for making visible the transmission of physical, mental, and moral characteristics from parents to children. Individual and family traits revealed through the construction of pedigree charts and hereditary analyses could then be classified, indexed, and made to work for eugenical ends, i.e. supporting reproduction among the “fit” and elimination of the “unfit.” According to eugenics genealogy discourse, “who you are” is your fixed hereditary make-up, passed down unchanged from ancestors to descendants; genealogical research reveals one’s hereditary inheritance. The ancestral knowledge produced through family history indicates whether a person is of “superior” or “inferior” quality, a benefit to the race and the nation or a burden.<sup>171</sup>

The International Congress of Genealogy, convened the last week of July 1915 in San Francisco, California, as part of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, brought together delegates from sixty-six organizations, including members of patriotic-heredity societies such as the Daughters of the American Revolution and Society of Mayflower Descendants, prominent national and regional genealogical societies such as the National Genealogical Society, the New England Historic Genealogical Society and the Mormon Genealogical Society of Utah, and family associations such as the Wilcox and Allied Families and The Smalls of America. There were also delegates from the Society of

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<sup>171</sup> I want to acknowledge two additional sources for this discussion of American eugenics. The “Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement,” hosted by the Dolan DNA Learning Center at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in Cold Spring Harbor, New York, is an online collection of eugenics related documents and images contributed from archives around the world. <<http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/list3.pl>> (accessed June 2010). The accessibility to information regarding the eugenics movement provided by the Cold Spring Harbor facility should be commended. Additionally, I was given the privilege of serving as a docent for the traveling exhibit “Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race,” created by the National Holocaust Memorial Museum to educate the public on the Nazi program of Racial Hygiene and euthanasia. Information about the exhibit is available online. <<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/deadlymedicine/>> (accessed June 2010).

Genealogists of London and the Imperial University of Tokyo. The Congress promoters sought to assemble practitioners, “to get them to agree upon certain methods of endeavor” and “perfect standards of work and records,” to “exchange views regarding more systematic procedure, and to consider the value or relative importance of heraldry, eugenics,” and related issues.<sup>172</sup> Papers were presented on records and naming practices among the Maori of New Zealand, the Chinese, and native Hawaiians and committees were established to advocate for new federal legislation compelling states to maintain vital records. The value of genealogy to American society and culture and the future of genealogical pursuit in the United States was of obvious concern to the delegates. The popular applied science of eugenics, understood as the science of “better human breeding” by its advocates, was one future path for genealogy research in the United States under consideration at the Congress.

Popenoe was hardly the only one at the Congress pointing out genealogy’s possible role in fostering eugenics. The implications of genealogy for eugenics research figured in a number of conference addresses. In his opening speech to the Congress, Colvin B. Brown, representing the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, said the delegates represented a “forward movement in race betterment.” Brown said to the assembled, “You recognize that you have inherited an obligation from your ancestors that you must fulfill to the best that is in you” – obligation in this context referring to the perpetuation of “good blood” – and “you must pass this down to those who follow after you” so that “each succeeding generation” approaches “nearer to the goal of perfect

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<sup>172</sup> James Adam Barr, “Forward,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 6 (October 1915): 157-158.

manhood and womanhood.”<sup>173</sup> Among the purposes of the Congress listed by Henry Byron Phillips of the California Genealogical Society was the goal “to collect and place at the disposal of all scientific investigation the necessary vital data upon which they must of necessity build in their efforts to conserve and improve the human race.”<sup>174</sup>

Specifically, genealogy provided a method for overcoming the challenges of translating Mendelian genetics to human research and the eugenical application of knowledge concerning human heredity. In his address to the crowd assembled in San Francisco, Popenoe appropriated genealogy for the eugenics cause by redefining its purposes away from family pride and popular “fad” and towards its use as a data-generator for research into the laws of heredity and eugenics. “You are familiar with the charge” that “genealogy is a subject of no use, a fad of the privileged class.” This charge was untrue, Popenoe told his listeners. But genealogy must cease being treated as an end-in-itself or as a “minster to family pride” and rather “link arms with the great biological movement of the present day” – eugenics and genealogy – “working in close harmony for the betterment of mankind.”<sup>175</sup>

As in the case of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Genealogical Society of Utah, eugenics leaders and advocates interpreted the genealogical assumption in bio-racialist terms but relied more extensively on heredity than either of the previous cases. The focus of eugenics interest was the transmission of hereditary “substance” from parent to offspring. What will be particularly evident in the case of the American

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<sup>173</sup> “Address of Colvin B. Brown,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 6 (October 1915): 166.

<sup>174</sup> Henry Byron Phillips, “International Congress of Genealogy Day,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 6 (October 1915): 167.

<sup>175</sup> Paul Popenoe, “Genealogy and Eugenics,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 6 (October 1915): 216.

eugenics movement, as opposed to the two previous cases, is the impact of the changing science of heredity. Because the eugenics movement used Mendelian genetics to explain the transmission of traits between generations, eugenics advocates did not treat genealogy and ancestral knowledge as a guidepost for right-living, as illustrated in the Daughters of the American Revolution case, but rather as a warning sign. The knowledge manifested in a genealogy, according to eugenics leaders and advocates, was fixed. Genealogical knowledge could prove beneficial in different ways: on an individual level in the choice of a spouse; on a collective (national) level in social engineering. This element of genealogy as a tool in generating population control policies makes the eugenics case unique among the six cases considered in this study.

### **Eugenics and Its American Context**

The international eugenics movement was built on the philosophical ideas of British naturalist Francis Galton and the re-discovered Mendelian laws of heredity, interpreted together in the broad context of Darwin's theory of evolution. Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, published *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences* in 1869. Galton sought to investigate the source of "natural ability," meaning "those qualifications of intellect and disposition" which "lead to" the kind of "reputation" which commanded public attention. Based on an examination of pedigrees and biographies of illustrious men of "reputation," Galton determined many of these men to be blood relatives and concluded that "natural ability" must be inheritable.<sup>176</sup>

*Hereditary Genius* was followed by *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*

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<sup>176</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *Heredity and Hope: The Case for Genetic Screening* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 13; Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (1985; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 3-4.



in 1883, which addressed differences in physical and mental abilities among individuals and races. Galton employed statistical analysis to interpret the laws of heredity, determining a statistical mean for the appearance of a character trait and measuring deviations from that mean. So, for example, Galton postulated a “law of regression,” which held that children tend to approach the statistical mean of a trait’s appearance in the population more closely than their parents. Galton’s “law of ancestral inheritance” concerned the ancestral degree of hereditary influence, i.e. parents contribute a fourth to the make-up of their children, grandparents an eighth, great-grandparents a sixteenth, and so on until you reach zero.<sup>177</sup>

Galton promoted the idea of using the findings of the science of heredity to produce “better” human beings, an applied science he called eugenics. The term “eugenics,” coined by Galton in 1883, combined the “Greek roots *eu*, meaning beautiful, and *gene*, meaning birth and inheritance.”<sup>178</sup> Darwin’s theory of evolution through natural selection was built into Galton’s concept of eugenics but with qualification. Though “predicated upon the principle of selection,” eugenics “represented a complete loss of faith that *natural* selection could operate within conditions of advanced civilization.”<sup>179</sup> Galton argued that social welfare programs, asylums, and settlement houses impeded the normal operation of natural selection, and he envisioned eugenics as a form of “controlled evolution” and a corrective to social welfare programs that enabled the feeble-minded, physically and mentally ill, and disabled to survive. The goal of eugenics, according to Galton, was to promote reproduction among people with “good

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<sup>177</sup> Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics*, 11-12; Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 18; Donald K. Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives*, 26-27.

<sup>178</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *Heredity and Hope*, 14.

<sup>179</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, 153.

traits” and prevent reproduction among those with “bad traits,” breed the “fit” and weed out the “unfit.” At the time, however, Galton lacked a workable theory concerning the mechanics of heredity, which prevented the emergence of a strong eugenics movement in Great Britain in the late nineteenth century. The re-discovery of Mendel’s laws of heredity at the turn of the century filled that gap.<sup>180</sup> Though Galton’s statistical methods proved to be scientifically faulty, his notion of eugenics proved appealing to old-stock white and wealthy Americans. By understanding the laws of heredity, Galton argued, human beings could engineer the evolution of races, ensuring that “superior elements” – meaning the wealthy of Northern European ancestry – remained superior and that threats were systematically and scientifically eliminated.<sup>181</sup>

Eugenics should be thought of as a mainstream scientific and popular movement rather than the cause of a fringe scientific minority.<sup>182</sup> With its themes of racial degeneration, scientific objectivity, expertise, and promise of state population management, the eugenics platform fit well into the progressive spirit of reform in the

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<sup>180</sup> Garland E. Allen, “The Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, 1910-1940,” *Osiris* 2<sup>nd</sup> Series 2 (1986): 225.

<sup>181</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *Heredity and Hope*, 14; Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics*, 11-12; Donald K. Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives*, 26-27.

<sup>182</sup> The present study concerns genealogy in the context of the United States, but it is important to remember that the eugenics movement was international, and leading eugenicists in one country were in communication with eugenicists in others. Eugenics movements existed in many European countries, including Great Britain, France, Denmark, and Germany, to name a few; but eugenics also flourished in Brazil, Japan, and the Soviet Union. See Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *Heredity and Hope*, “Chapter 1: Many Varieties of Beautiful Inheritance” for an excellent summary of international eugenics. The Nazi government instituted extensive and effective eugenics measures beginning in 1933 with compulsory sterilization of those in German social welfare institutions and prisons and growing by 1939 to include secret pediatric and adult euthanasia programs. The exhibit “Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race” argues that the Nazi eugenics programs, specifically the euthanasia component, culminated in the genocide of European Jewry.

United States during the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>183</sup> Industrialization, rapid urbanization, economic instability and labor unrest, concern about declining birth rates among upper and middle class whites, and mass immigration brought the existence of “social problems” – such as crime and poverty – to public attention and contributed to an interest in eugenics among scientists, politicians, and public opinion makers. Beginning slowly in the 1870s, concern grew among old-stock middle and upper class white Protestants about the future of their racial dominance. Immigration generated particular anxiety. For example, Francis Walker, an MIT professor and superintendent of the 1870 and 1880 U.S. Censuses, raised fears of “racial suicide” after arguing in an 1896 *Atlantic Monthly* article that immigrants were reproducing faster than native-born Americans.<sup>184</sup> A movement to restrict the entry of immigrants into the United States was gaining ground throughout the 1880s and `90s. The Chinese Exclusion Act, for instance, was passed in 1882, halting immigration from China, and the Immigrant Restriction League was founded in 1894.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, the notion of eugenics entered the consciousness of upper and middle class, old-stock Protestant whites in the United States – a consciousness already primed for ideas concerning the health of the race and nation – and was espoused in multiple cultural sites in American culture and society, from research facilities and professional associations to college curricula, from Congressional committees to popular literature.<sup>185</sup> Health guru John H. Kellogg’s *Race*

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<sup>183</sup> For more on these themes, see Yulia Hen, “Improving the Human ‘Race’ As a Problem of Eugenics (History, Attempts at Substantiation, Practice),” *Social Sciences* 37, no. 3 (2006): 103-120.

<sup>184</sup> Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics*, 11-12; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, 156.

<sup>185</sup> Kevles describes eugenic “enthusiasts” as being “largely middle to upper middle class, white, Anglo-Saxon, predominantly Protestant, and educated.” Leaders and followers in the eugenics

Betterment Foundation, for example, held conferences in 1913, 1914, and 1928 in Battle Creek, Michigan. The Galton Society, the most overtly racist of eugenics associations in the United States, was founded in New York in 1918. The American Eugenics Society, formed in New York in 1923, ultimately included twenty-eight state committees.<sup>186</sup> The American Eugenics Society's education committee organized "fitter family" contests and exhibits for state fairs throughout the country.<sup>187</sup> Eugenics was featured in courses at numerous academic colleges, including Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, Wisconsin, and Clark, and textbooks were written to meet the needs of these courses. Articles on eugenics topics were also published in popular magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* and the *Saturday Evening Post*.<sup>188</sup> One scholar notes that by the 1920s, "eugenics had evolved from a specialized field of social study to a staple of American culture."<sup>189</sup>

American eugenics, unlike its counterpart in Great Britain, was formulated primarily in terms of biological race rather than social class.<sup>190</sup> Scientists, politicians, and others interpreted social conditions in bio-racial terms, i.e. identifying the "fit" as economically successful whites of Anglo-Saxon descent and the "unfit" as those who were lower class or racial minorities.<sup>191</sup> Miscegenation, of course, was commonly

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movement had the "time and inclination to attend lectures and debates, interested themselves in public affairs," and kept up with the latest scientific developments. While women did not play a significant role on the national level, women played a "prominent" role on the local level. Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 64.

<sup>186</sup> The American Eugenics Society received substantial funding from John D. Rockefeller Jr. and George Eastman. Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 60.

<sup>187</sup> "Eugenics Popularization," Dolan DNA Learning Center at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, <[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay\\_6\\_fs.html](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay_6_fs.html)> (accessed March 2010).

<sup>188</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, 162.

<sup>189</sup> Paul A. Lombardo, "Pedigrees, Propaganda, and Paranoia: Family Studies in Historical Context," *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions* 214 (Fall 2001): 252.

<sup>190</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *Heredity and Hope*, 16; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, 154; Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 74, 76.

<sup>191</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, 163.

considered a path to degeneracy, but Mendelian genetics provided a scientific explanation for the “ruin” brought upon the individual and the race as a result of mixed-race relationships. Mixing between whites and blacks, however, did not figure significantly in eugenics discourse, its results being seen as established fact. Distinctions between whites, between those old-stock Americans of Northern European ancestry and the new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, were of considerable concern to eugenics leaders and advocates. Works such as Edward A. Ross’ *The Old World in the New*, published in 1912, and Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race*, first published in 1916 but subsequently republished throughout the 1920s, popularized racial characterizations of European peoples. Grant’s book in particular spread the notion of defining Europeans as Nordic, Alpine, or Mediterranean stock and celebrated the achievements of the blond-haired, blue-eyed Nordic. But, in line with others bemoaning “race suicide,” Grant argued that the influence of Nordics in American civilization was in decline as those of Nordic descent abandoned public life and public space to Mediterranean stock. Intelligence testing, pioneered during World War I, was also applied to those arriving on Ellis Island, generating “evidence” of degenerate stock stepping onto America’s shore.<sup>192</sup>

Part of the success of eugenics advocates in the United States in generating public awareness of eugenics and supporting legislation depended on the creation of an institutional apparatus. Eugenics advocates initially found an institutional home in the American Breeders’ Association. The American Breeders’ Association, founded in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1903 by the American Agricultural Colleges and Experimental

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<sup>192</sup> Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics*, 151.

Stations, a group of agricultural breeders and academic biologists, was the first major research organization devoted to studying the practical application of Mendelian genetics. The *American Breeders' Magazine* began publication in 1905, originally offering primarily articles on plant and animal breeding research. Examining the Mendelian laws of heredity in plants and animals was one thing, but translating that research to human beings posed an immediate problem: human beings produced less offspring and less often than plants and most animals, and the time span between human generations made it difficult to follow a trait from one generation to another. This did not, however, prevent the emergence of an ABA committee devoted exclusively to eugenics.<sup>193</sup>

The Eugenics Committee was established in 1906 and was a veritable “who’s who” of the American eugenics movement, including noted academics such as Harvard geneticist William E. Castle, University of Chicago sociologist Charles R. Henderson, and Stanford biologist Vernon L. Kellogg. Many of the committee’s most influential members looked to genealogy as a means of overcoming the problems of examining Mendel’s hereditary laws in human beings. Noted inventor Alexander Graham Bell, for example, established the Genealogical Record Office in Washington D.C. in 1914 for the purpose of studying human longevity.<sup>194</sup> David Starr Jordan, first president of Stanford, offered a “glance at scientific aspects of genealogy” in his 1929 collection of British and American lineages *Our Family Tree*, co-authored with Sarah Louis Kimball. Charles B. Davenport, though not a member of the Eugenics Committee, exercised a tremendous influence on the American Breeders’ Association’s interest in eugenics. Davenport,

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<sup>193</sup> Barbara A. Kimmelman provides an extensive institutional history of the American Breeders’ Association in her article “The American Breeders’ Association: Genetics and Eugenics in an Agricultural Context, 1903-1913,” *Social Studies of Science* 13, no. 2 (May 1983): 163-204.

<sup>194</sup> Alexander Graham Bell had already established the Volta Bureau in 1877 in Washington D.C. to study hereditary deafness.

formally a biologist at the University of Chicago, served on ABA's Committee on Theoretical Research and as director of the Carnegie Institution of Washington's Station for Experimental Evolution. The Eugenics Committee eventually organized subcommittees devoted to scientific investigation, education, and anti-immigration legislation.<sup>195</sup>

The Eugenics Record Office (ERO) was the leading eugenics research facility in the United States. The ERO was established by Davenport in October 1910 as an extension of the Carnegie Institution's Station for Experimental Evolution and was funded largely by widow and philanthropist Mary Williamson Harriman. Unlike the Station for Experimental Evolution, which studied plant and non-human animal reproduction, the ERO was devoted exclusively to the study of human heredity. The Cold Spring Harbor institution was the only major eugenics institution with an actual research facility and a paid staff, which provided the ERO with at least the appearance of scientific credibility.<sup>196</sup> Harry H. Laughlin, an associate of Davenport's, served as the ERO's superintendent and helped edit the institution's *Eugenical News*. The ERO provided public education on eugenics principles and marriage selection counseling, but the institution's primary purpose was the collection and indexing of genealogical information and family histories. The ERO therefore provides a prime example of how genealogy was put to use by the eugenics movement.

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<sup>195</sup> Barbara A. Kimmelman's history indicates that the American Breeders' Association, while helping to legitimize eugenics in the United State, refrained from participating in popular eugenics campaigns enacted by other organizations. In 1912, the American Breeders' Association was reorganized and renamed the American Genetic Association; *The American Breeders' Magazine* was renamed the *Journal of Heredity* in 1913.

<sup>196</sup> Garland E. Allen, "The Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, 1910-1940," 226-227.

Davenport wanted the Eugenics Record Office to be a central repository for genealogical information in the United States, one which could provide data for research on human heredity and evidence in support eugenics programs and propaganda. Family information was collected through a variety of methods. The facility trained field workers to visit mental institutions, hospitals, and individual homes to collect family histories, analyze pedigrees, and report on character traits. Many of these field workers were school and college teachers, employees of welfare and criminal institutions, and physicians; the majority of field workers were women.<sup>197</sup> The ERO sent out information to other organizations and institutions, such as college departments, soliciting interest in eugenical family studies.<sup>198</sup> The institution also accepted individual family history submissions and provided instructional materials for the preparation and submission of family data, such as *How to Make a Eugenical Family Study*, published in 1915. Finally, the institution maintained a newspaper clippings collection that included the genealogical column from the *Boston Evening Transcript* as well as marriage notices and obituaries from major newspapers around the country.<sup>199</sup> The Eugenics Record Office used the information collected to develop an analytical index of character traits based on its own “complex classification system” found in *The Trait Book*, published in 1912. *The Trait Book* assigned a number, similar to the Dewey decimal system, to each trait, enabling a

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<sup>197</sup> Nicole Hahn Rafter, *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies, 1877-1919* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 20-22.

<sup>198</sup> For example, the ERO solicited family information in the Mormon associated *Deseret Evening News* (see the 22 April 1911 edition) and the genealogy department of the *Boston Evening Transcript*.

<sup>199</sup> Thomas H. Roderick, V. Elving Anderson, Robert Charles Anderson, Roger D. Joslyn, Wayne T. Morris, “Files of the Eugenics Record Office,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 82.2 (June 1994): 98.



cross-indexing across family records, geographic origin, and individual trait.<sup>200</sup> For instance, “Hairiness” is identified as trait #148; specific traits associated with “Eyebrows” are indicated by numbers which extend the “Hairiness” category, e.g. #148211 for “Heavy,” #148212 for “Sparse,” #148215 for “Uniting above nose.”<sup>201</sup>

The eugenics movement in the United States and abroad sought to enact legislation in line with eugenic aims of “better breeding” and elimination of the hereditarily “unfit.” Though influenced by social Darwinism, unlike social Darwinists of the late nineteenth century, eugenicists recognized the necessity for state management of populations.<sup>202</sup> Eugenics advocates did support “positive” eugenics measures, such as careful selection of marriage partners, personal hygiene, and pre-natal care, but many of the movement’s leading figures – including Davenport, Jordan, Bell, and Laughlin – actively lobbied for legislation to prevent members of the public they deemed “unfit” from reproducing or even entering the United States. Compulsory sterilization laws were enacted in 1910 in California, Connecticut, and Indiana, which permitted the sterilization of criminals, rapists, the mentally deficient, and others “confined in state-funded institutions such as prisons, insane asylums, and residences for the feeble-minded.” Eugenics advocates managed to enact sterilization legislation in eighteen more states by 1940, perhaps encouraged by the 1927 Supreme Court ruling in *Buck v. Bell*, which upheld the constitutionality of Virginia’s sterilization law.<sup>203</sup> Miscegenation laws, a

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<sup>200</sup> Garland E. Allen, “The Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, 1910-1940,” 239.

<sup>201</sup> Charles B. Davenport, *Eugenics Record Office Bulletin No. 6: The Trait Book*, Long Island, NY: Cold Spring Harbor, 1912, 14.

<sup>202</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, 164.

<sup>203</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *Heredity and Hope*, 18; Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics* 115-116. Paul Lombardo notes in regards to the Carrie Buck case that the pedigree offered as evidence of the Bucks’ feeble-mindedness has subsequently been shown by scholars to be inaccurate, and that Carrie Buck’s pregnancy was not the result of promiscuity on her part but

long-standing part of the Southern legal system, were given new justification by eugenics advocates who argued that racial hybridization brought about hereditary degeneration.<sup>204</sup> In 1913, twenty-nine states had laws against mixed-race marriages.<sup>205</sup> Furthermore, eugenics advocates – ERO’s Laughlin in particular – provided testimony to the Congressional committee that wrote the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, which instituted quotas on how many immigrants would be allowed to legally enter the United States.

Eugenics was not without its critics in the United States. It should be remembered that eugenics flourished among a particular segment of the population: upper and middle class, white, native-born Protestants. Even among this group, there were disagreements about the methods, if not the ends, of eugenics. For example, while Willet M. Hays, leader of the American Breeders’ Association, agreed with the goals of eugenics and advocated “positive” eugenics, Hays strongly expressed reservations about Davenport’s strident support of “negative” eugenics, e.g. sterilization.<sup>206</sup> Others, such as Bertrand Russell, rejected eugenics on civil liberties grounds, expressing concern about too much government intervention in the lives of Americans.<sup>207</sup> Catholics both in the United States and abroad were often vocal opponents of eugenics, having already taken stands against contraception and sterilization; according to the Catholic Church, every individual person was a child of God and therefore deserved respect regardless of

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rather rape; Paul A. Lombardo, “Pedigrees, Propaganda, and Paranoia: Family Studies in Historical Context,” 252.

<sup>204</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *Heredity and Hope*, 21.

<sup>205</sup> Steven Selden, “Eugenics Popularization,” Dolan DNA Learning Center at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, <[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay\\_6\\_fs.html](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay_6_fs.html)> (accessed March 2010).

<sup>206</sup> Barbara A. Kimmelman, “The American Breeders’ Association,” 187.

<sup>207</sup> Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 120.

biological condition.<sup>208</sup> Though they were never a majority during the heyday of eugenics, some sociologists and psychologists, including Lester Ward and Charles Cooley, questioned the eugenicists over reliance on hereditarian explanations for social behavior.<sup>209</sup> It is also necessary to remember that in addition to critics, the American eugenics movement had victims. Historian Paul A. Lombardo writes that the anxieties and fears of eugenics advocates were “played out” on “thousands subjected to sexual sterilization; thousands more who lost identity, dignity, and heritage through the ‘racial integrity’ laws; and millions blocked from entry by laws restricting immigration by certain ethnic ‘inferiors’.”<sup>210</sup>

### **Genealogy as a Tool for Eugenics**

The notion of using genealogy as a tool for eugenical ends, which Popenoe presented to the International Congress of Genealogy, was hardly a novel idea. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there were two primary methods for conducting research on human heredity: researchers either traced the recurrence of a single trait through several generations of the same family or studied a particular group / population, such as inmates in a prison or asylum, determining if their ancestors shared similar traits.<sup>211</sup> *The Jukes*, first published in 1877 by Richard Dugdale, was one of the most popular family studies, reprinted in multiple editions for decades. During an inspection of Ulster County jails for the Prison Association of New York, Dugdale discovered six “blood” relatives, with four family names, in jail at the same time.

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<sup>208</sup> Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics*, 83; Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 119.

<sup>209</sup> Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics*, 84; Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, 166-167.

<sup>210</sup> Paul A. Lombardo, “Pedigrees, Propaganda, and Paranoia: Family Studies in Historical Context,” 248.

<sup>211</sup> Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics*, 24.

Dugdale investigated poorhouse, prison, and courthouse records as well as testimony from neighbors to argue that tendencies toward crime, prostitution, and poverty may be inherited.<sup>212</sup> However, Dugdale, writing when inheritance of acquired characters dominated hereditarian thinking, qualified his findings by noting that environmental factors may reinforce these tendencies. Later hereditarians often ignored the environmental aspect of Dugdale's argument, using *The Jukes* as evidence of their argument that "unfit" persons spawn more "unfit" people.<sup>213</sup> Family studies in general moved away from cautious conclusions based on explanations that included both heredity and environment to dogmatic conclusions resting purely on hereditarian explanations after the re-discovery of Mendelian genetics.<sup>214</sup> For example, Henry H. Goddard's *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-mindedness* traced the family history of Deborah Kallikak, the pseudonym of a "moron" girl living at Vineland Training School for the Feeble-minded in New Jersey; Goddard concluded from his research that no amount of environmental change would have affected the life chances of the Kallikak family.<sup>215</sup>

The argument Popenoe put forth at the International Congress of Genealogy was that *everyone* should submit their genealogies for eugenical purposes, contributing not only to research on human heredity but also providing individuals with tools for personal well-being. It is possible Popenoe's audience was familiar with the idea, as it was

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<sup>212</sup> Dugdale found that of the seven hundred nine Jukes he uncovered, eighteen had been brothel keepers, one hundred twenty-eight had been prostitutes, seventy-six were convicted criminals, and more than two hundred had been on government relief. Dugdale estimated that it cost the public over a million dollars to house and care for Jukes, thereby providing evidence of eliminating this social burden through eugenical measures. Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics*, 21-22.

<sup>213</sup> Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics*, 21-22.

<sup>214</sup> Nicole Hahn Rafter, *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies*, 9.

<sup>215</sup> Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics*, 106.

discussed in both eugenics and non-eugenics oriented publications. The American Genetics Association's *Journal of Heredity*, for example, often took up the topic in its pages. Eben Putnam, one-time editor of *Genealogical Magazine*, explained genealogy methods for a eugenics audience in his 1918 article, "Tracing Your Ancestors," arguing it is "sensible and practical" to "learn the nature and source of our various characteristics." Putman argued that ancestral knowledge, information about a family's "good" or "bad" hereditary traits, could prevent the perpetuation of "bad" traits through procreation; genealogy, therefore, may aid in solving future social problems: "Forewarned is forearmed."<sup>216</sup>

In a 1921 article for the *Journal of Heredity*, David Fairbanks explained the process of creating "A Genetic Portrait Chart," a "visual representation" and "clear picture" of those who contributed to his / her characteristics – a picture which every child was "entitled to see." Photographs, according to Fairbanks, provided insight into the character of one's relatives: "Was it not after all into their faces that their friends looked to read their character when they were alive?" Fairbanks may have been expressing a bit of folk wisdom, but the eugenics movement was influenced by the field of criminal anthropology, which emerged in Italy at the of the nineteenth century; Cesare Lombroso, a leader in criminal anthropology in Italy, argued that physical deformity correlated with criminal behavior.<sup>217</sup> Some in the eugenics movement picked up on the work of criminal anthropologists to make arguments about the hereditary quality of a person based on phenotypic features. By offering a model from photographs of his own children's ancestors, Fairbanks hoped to interest others unfamiliar with the science of heredity to

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<sup>216</sup> Eben Putnam, "Tracing Your Ancestors," *Journal of Heredity* 9 (January 1918): 8-14.

<sup>217</sup> Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics*, 14-15.

make their own “Genetic Portrait Charts,” which would perhaps interest friends and bring their ideas on heredity “more nearly in line” with current research.<sup>218</sup>

Other non-eugenics oriented publications featured articles advocating a similar definition of the purposes of genealogy, positioning the practice as a practical component of scientific research on human heredity and its eugenical application. For example, G.W. Dial described to readers in a 1905 article in *New England Magazine* the emergence of “Philosophical Genealogy,” meaning the “study of hereditary instincts and characteristics”; the “truths developed in philosophical genealogy,” wrote Dial, “are being applied to facilitate our present race development and to increase the happiness of our everyday life.” In this context, genealogy could provide the individual insight into the “limits and possibilities of his physical, mental, and moral prowess” and make visible the “virtues and vices possessed by the individual.”<sup>219</sup> The editors of the *Journal of American History* – a publication of The Associated Publishers of American Records – asserted in 1909 that genealogy would form the “foundation” of the science of heredity and advocated for establishing a central clearinghouse for genealogical data accessible to those engaged in research on heredity.<sup>220</sup>

Genealogy organizations took up the topic in the pages of their journals as well. “The great contribution which we can make to science is along the line of heredity,” said Charles K. Bolten of the New England Historic Genealogical Society in 1909. Scientists are espousing theories about character transmission, and genealogists can either confirm

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<sup>218</sup> David Fairbanks, “A Genetic Portrait Chart,” *Journal of Heredity* 12, no. 5 (May 1921): 213-219; Fairbanks’ article was reprinted in the June 1922 issue of the *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine*.

<sup>219</sup> G.W. Dial, “The Value of Genealogy,” *New England Magazine* 33, no. 3 (November 1905): 284-292.

<sup>220</sup> “The Inauguration of Genealogy as the Science of Heredity,” *Journal of American History* 3, no. 1 (1909): 145-148.

or silence such theories through data generated by their own family history research. Bolten concluded for readers: “To know right living in our ancestors encourages us to higher ideals. To learn ancestral weakness or disease prepares us to work intelligently to overcome unfortunate inheritances. Genealogy as a science helps us, therefore, to help ourselves.”<sup>221</sup> National Genealogical Society president Joseph G.B. Bulloch stated in his annual address that the “true genealogist must be historian and scientist” and “have the welfare of humanity so much to heart” that he studies not only eugenics but also the “environment of the individual and aid him to rise superior to the past by placing before him the correct manner of living and showing him the road he must travel, in order to reach perfection.” Noting the “degeneracy and decay” brought about by immigrants, African Americans, and Native Americans, Bulloch asked his audience: “Should we not advise those of our race” – i.e. those who are white and with considerable money and leisure time for genealogical pursuits – “to be careful of an admixture of so many diverse elements of society” and thereby prevent “tainted blood or vicious qualities” from being “engrafted upon the white race?”<sup>222</sup>

Eugenics advocates, particularly those associated with Davenport’s Eugenics Record Office, encouraged all Americans to submit their genealogies and family histories to the ERO. “Persons intelligently interested in their ancestry,” Popenoe told those in

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<sup>221</sup> Charles K. Bolten, “The New Genealogy,” reprinted in *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 14 (July 1913): 126-129.

<sup>222</sup> Joseph G.B. Bulloch, “The Problems Which Now Confront Us,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (October 1912): 39-41. I do not want to suggest that Bulloch’s address is representative of the published content of the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*. The only other stated references to eugenics in my brief survey of the early issues of *NGS Quarterly* was an article by Bulloch called “A Study in Eugenics” and advertisements for Eugenics Record Office publications. The evidence of eugenics in *NGS Quarterly* may be due primarily to Bulloch’s role as president of the Society, but the ideas more than likely had some currency for members of the constituency that elected him.

attendance at the International Congress of Genealogy, “might well consider it a duty to society, and to their own posterity, to send for one of the Eugenics Record Office Schedules, fill it out and place it on file there,” and to do the same with Alexander Graham Bell’s Genealogical Record Office. To this end, the Eugenics Record Office published *How to Make a Eugenical Family Study* in 1915. Davenport wrote in the bulletin, “Our family traits are not personal matters; they come to us from out of the population of the past, and, in so far as we have children, they become disseminated throughout the population of the future.”<sup>223</sup> In other words, members of American society have a duty to contribute genealogical information for the purposes of perfecting that society. The day will come, Davenport argued, when “knowledge of a person’s inborn capacities will be the greatest advantage in fitting the man to the job”; such knowledge will lead to more focused and efficient education rather than allowing a mediocre education, geared to the “average,” suit everyone. Finally, Davenport noted the value of genealogical information for the selection of marriage partners and prevention of “obviously unfit unions.”<sup>224</sup> Davenport concluded that “organized society has a right to know the racial qualities of its human breeding stock, for organized society is the only agency to which can be entrusted the guardianship of the quality of the germplasm of the future.”<sup>225</sup> But what does a genealogy for eugenics look like?

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<sup>223</sup> Popenoe made a similar argument to Congress attendees: Genealogy broadens an individual’s view, to see his / her family “as an integral part of the great fabric of human life, its warp and woof continuous from the dawn of creation and criss-crossed [sic] at each generation.” Paul Popenoe, “Genealogy and Eugenics,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 6, no. 3 (October 1915): 216-217.

<sup>224</sup> Charles B. Davenport and Harry H. Laughlin, *Eugenics Record Office Bulletin No. 13: How to Make a Eugenical Family Study*, Long Island, NY: Cold Spring Harbor, 1915, 3-5.

<sup>225</sup> Charles B. Davenport and Harry H. Laughlin, *How to Make a Eugenical Family Study*, 33.



### *How to Make a Eugenic Family Study*

Eugenics advocates argued that genealogy for eugenics demanded a shift in the generally accepted points of interest in traditional genealogy. Genealogy, as it was currently practiced, Popenoe argued, is inadequate for the purposes of studying the laws of heredity and their eugenical application. “The information which is of most value is exactly that which genealogy ordinarily does not furnish.” While dates of birth, marriage, and death are of interest, these facts rarely hold “real biological value.” The facts which matter most are the ones concerning “physical and mental” abilities and character. With perhaps the patriotic heredity-based societies in mind, Popenoe further argued that genealogies often provide too little information. It is not uncommon for American genealogies to “deal only with the direct ancestors of the individual, omitting all brothers and sisters of those ancestors” who also provide vital information regarding the transmission of a family’s hereditary traits. Finally, because genealogy is often used to gain social position, “in too many cases discreditable data has been tacitly omitted from the records”; “Such a lack of candor is not in accord with the scientific spirit and makes one uncertain, in the use of genealogies, to what extent he is really getting all the facts.”<sup>226</sup>

Howard J. Banker of the Eugenics Record Office laid out the fundamental principles and guidelines for constructing an “ideal family history” in greater detail in an address to the Second International Congress of Eugenics in 1921. According to Banker, a genealogy forms the skeleton of a eugenical family history, “placing positive

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<sup>226</sup> Paul Popenoe, “Genealogy and Eugenics,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 6, no. 3 (October 1915): 204-205.

restrictions upon the writer of the family history.”<sup>227</sup> Banker noted two ill-advised considerations for determining the scope – i.e. the “positive restrictions” – of a family history. First, the tendency to “trace back to the earliest possible ancestor,” Banker argued, may lead to interesting revelations but sacrifices information of far greater value. Current scientific understanding about the “transmission of hereditary traits” holds that the most distant ancestors contribute the least to one’s character and ability and have little “influence on our lives through the family life or by means of their ideas or the environment which they established at the family hearth.”<sup>228</sup> What is important, Davenport wrote in the ERO’s *How to Make a Eugenic Family Study*, is not how far back in time the researcher can trace a relationship but rather what information can be obtained regarding closer kin.<sup>229</sup> Second, the tendency to focus exclusively on the descendents of one ancestor, usually just the male line of descent, produces a family history which is “not only a fragment but a mutilated fragment for the line of limitation cuts continually right through the most intimate and vital relationships,” that among family members.<sup>230</sup> For this reason, Banker stated that the “conception of a family tree” – beginning with a single ancestor and branching to the descendents – belongs to the thought of an obsolete age” and that conceptualizing the family group as a “more or less intricate network” better conforms with “social” and “scientific ideas of the present.”<sup>231</sup>

A eugenic family study radiates out from a determined center. According to Banker, the researcher should start by selecting a “pair of consorts,” perhaps chosen for

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<sup>227</sup> Howard J. Banker, “The Ideal Family History,” in *Second International Congress of Eugenics – Scientific Papers* (Baltimore: Williams and Williams, 1923): 306.

<sup>228</sup> Howard J. Banker, “The Ideal Family History,” 309.

<sup>229</sup> Charles B. Davenport and Harry H. Laughlin, *How to Make a Eugenic Family Study*, 6.

<sup>230</sup> Howard J. Banker, “The Ideal Family History,” 307.

<sup>231</sup> Howard J. Banker, “The Ideal Family History,” 308.

“their central location within the family net.” Following the order of primogeniture, a eugenical family history should “include the ancestry and ancestral fraternities for at least three generations.” How far back the genealogy should extend depends on the wants and needs of the writer, but it should radiate from a “selected center.”<sup>232</sup> The pedigree chart was the form privileged by ERO associates. The pedigree chart, suggested Banker, provides the “most satisfactory method” for mapping out a large or complex “family network.”<sup>233</sup> According to Davenport, plotting family relationships on a pedigree chart was the first step in preparing a “eugenical interpretation” of a family history. If one particular trait is of interest, suggested Davenport, then it can be easily marked on the chart with symbols, making it easier to see how the trait has or has not manifested itself in family members.<sup>234</sup> But the pedigree chart is “only a convenience.” The pedigree chart organized ancestors, identifying the relationship of individuals as parents and children. The “essential work” lies in recording significant facts for each individual in the chart.<sup>235</sup>

The pedigree chart, ERO associates believed, was “only the skeleton upon which to hang the flesh and blood of the real individual.”<sup>236</sup> Adding flesh to the bones of a pedigree chart, said Banker, involves looking around rather than looking back; “A family historian does the greatest service to his family when he writes fully of those matters of which he knows the most,” providing to the next generation “accurate portraits” of the preceding generation.<sup>237</sup> Popenoe provided additional examples of useful information for

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<sup>232</sup> Howard J. Banker, “The Ideal Family History,” 308.

<sup>233</sup> Howard J. Banker, “The Ideal Family History,” 310.

<sup>234</sup> Charles B. Davenport and Harry H. Laughlin, *How to Make a Eugenical Family Study*, 7-9.

<sup>235</sup> Charles B. Davenport and Harry H. Laughlin, *How to Make a Eugenical Family Study*, 9.

<sup>236</sup> Charles B. Davenport and Harry H. Laughlin, *How to Make a Eugenical Family Study*, 9.

<sup>237</sup> Howard J. Banker, “The Ideal Family History,” 310.

“clothing” one’s ancestors with “personality” in his address, including photographs and precise physical measurements; “The door jamb,” Popenoe stated, “is not a satisfactory place for recording the heights of children,” clearly implying that the genealogical record would be more suitable.<sup>238</sup>

The Eugenics Record Office provided a format for describing and cataloging individual family members’ physical, mental, and moral traits. The ERO’s Individual Analysis Card, a sample of which appeared in *How to Make a Eugenical Family Study*, gave researchers a way to systematically collect information on each family member. The Card’s instructions note that the cards were “intended to accompany the *Pedigree Chart*,” with one card for each individual on the chart. If the information obtained was to be eugenically useful, “all statements – concerning both good and bad traits – must be frank and fair.”<sup>239</sup> The Card was divided into the following sections: individual history, “Physical” traits, “Mental” traits, “Temperamental” traits, and “Personal Appearance.” Additionally, if available, a “full-face or profile” photograph of the individual should accompany his / her Individual Analysis Card.<sup>240</sup>

Individual analysis cards enabled Eugenics Record Office researchers and fieldworkers to carefully catalogue, quantify, and index traits by restricting the range of answers. For example, in the category of “individual history,” the cards asked basic genealogical information, i.e. birth and death dates and locations, marriage, education, occupations but also the rather subjective question about “Success in life – below, commensurate with, or above opportunities.” Under “Physical” traits, the cards asked

<sup>238</sup> Paul Popenoe, “Genealogy and Eugenics,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 6, no. 3 (October 1915): 206.

<sup>239</sup> Charles B. Davenport and Harry H. Laughlin, “Individual Analysis Card” sample, in *How to Make a Eugenical Family Study*, 10.

<sup>240</sup> Charles B. Davenport and Harry H. Laughlin, *How to Make a Eugenical Family Study*, 9.

about country of origin for four grand-parents (interesting that this falls under “Physical” traits), complexion, hair and eye color, illnesses and surgical operations, whether one was right or left handed and ability to do manual labor, natural walking gait being “very brisk, moderate, leisurely, shuffling.” Under “Mental” traits, the cards asked for a “grade by underscoring” for a number of described traits for “Art” (singing or instrumental, composition, modeling, landscaping, etc.), “Craftsmanship” (carpentry, pattern making, plumbing, etc.), “Letters” (spelling, satire, humor, public speaking, etc.), “Science” (research, invention, exploration, engineering, etc.), “Social Service” (teaching, preaching, social welfare, etc.), and “Business” (salesmanship, buying, accounting, etc.). Under “Temperamental” traits, the cards asked for a description of “prevailing mood” and “periodicity in nervous behavior” as well as an evaluation of a list of various traits, including common sense, moral courage, self-respect, caution, ability to take a joke, fretfulness, cruelty, nightmares, saving or spending. Finally, the cards asked for a personal description should a photograph not be available.<sup>241</sup> Information was abstracted from the cards and then cross-indexed by family, by geographic origin, and by individual trait.

Scholars have criticized the Eugenics Record Office information, both that collected through field workers and that submitted voluntarily by individual families, on a number of points. The evidence gathered to make visible the social bond between a person and his or her progenitors was often faulty at both the point of data collection and at the point of interpretation. Biologist and historian Garland E. Allen points to something which should be apparent at this point: “despite Davenport’s and Laughlin’s

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<sup>241</sup> Charles B. Davenport and Harry H. Laughlin, “Individual Analysis Card” sample, in *How to Make a Eugenical Family Study*, 10-13.

emphasis on rigorous, quantitative methodology, most of the data collected were of a subjective, impressionistic nature.” In regards to the voluntary submissions, the information reflected the measurements of traits by different people in different ways – sometimes guesses on height and weight, sometimes recollections of distant or dead relatives – completely lacking in uniformity.<sup>242</sup> In addition, pedigree charts, a primary method of organizing and analyzing data at the ERO, could not adequately represent the transmission of character traits. Allen notes that “many families have only a small number of children” and therefore the lack of appearance of a trait revealed little about its hereditary transmission. Furthermore, a pedigree chart did not provide a way to distinguish between what is determined by heredity and what is the result of environmental factors.<sup>243</sup>

## **Discussion**

The American eugenics movement declined in influence during the 1930s. Mainstream geneticists had begun distancing themselves from the scientific claims of eugenics leaders and advocates during World War I so that by the 1920s, the American eugenics movement was dominated by elitists and vocal racists and therefore took on a more “fringe” aspect.<sup>244</sup> Furthermore, anthropologists and psychologists were also beginning to question eugenics on a scientific basis and reconsidering the role of environmental factors in individual character formation. Over the course of the depression decade of the 1930s, as unemployment spread widely and millionaires lost fortunes, it became increasingly difficult to argue that “social failure” was the result of

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<sup>242</sup> Garland E. Allen, “The Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, 1910-1940,” 243.

<sup>243</sup> Garland E. Allen, “The Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, 1910-1940,” -244.

<sup>244</sup> Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 122.

hereditary “unfitness.” Finally, by the end of World War II, as National Socialism’s euthanasia programs and genocide and experimentations on European Jewry came to light, it was nearly impossible to disassociate the concept of eugenics from activities carried out by the Nazis.<sup>245</sup> After an investigation by the Carnegie Institution, which determined its research lacked scientific merit, the Eugenics Record Office was shut down in 1939.<sup>246</sup>

The element of population control makes the genealogy discourse produced by the leaders and advocates of eugenics in the United States unique among the six cases discussed in this study. The genealogical assumption was complicit in eugenical population control. In the context of eugenics, genealogy was treated, more often than not, as a method for legitimating social segregation and violence on the human body. Genealogy was seen as a research process that tells “us” – the scientists, politicians, opinion makers – who “you” are, i.e. genealogy creates a claim about hereditary “fitness” to be used by policymakers in enacting social control measures. Eugenics called upon hereditary science, namely Mendelian genetics, to produce an interpretation of “natural facts,” i.e. ancestral knowledge about a person, which could be used to select a possible marriage partner or justify forced sterilization, to rationalize wealth or legitimize segregation.

The methods used to gather information regarding hereditary characteristics did not emerge in a vacuum; the eugenics movement turned to the existing practice of

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<sup>245</sup> Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics*, 178-180; Donald K. Pickens, *Eugenics and Progressives*, 5.

<sup>246</sup> Steven Selden, “Eugenics Popularization,” Dolan DNA Learning Center at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, <[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay\\_6\\_fs.html](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay_6_fs.html)> (accessed March 2010). The Carnegie Institution was particularly concerned with the Eugenics Record Office’s growing support of Nazi eugenics during the 1930s. *Eugenical News* served as significant forum for bringing Nazi eugenics to the American public.

genealogy for the purpose of gathering and organizing hereditary information.

Genealogy, according to the discourse, produced ancestral knowledge which could be used to determine one's hereditary "fitness" and therefore whether one contributed to the health or destruction of the nation. As in the Mormon case, eugenics genealogy revolved around a "center," but in this case, a clearly defined set of ancestors reveal information about a set of progeny: parents, grandparents, great-grandparents. Whereas in the 1890s the Daughters would regard their response to their genealogies as a means of securing the continuity of Revolutionary principles and traits to offspring, therefore providing a defense against perceived threats to that ancestral inheritance, the eugenicists' Mendelian take did not open up such opportunities for individual change except through the process of mate selection and the elimination of "bad seeds" from the American gene pool.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

Charles G. Finny Wilcox's address to the International Congress of Genealogy, grandly entitled "Genealogy and Its Place in the Affairs of Human Society," served, for all intent and purposes, as a rebuttal to Popenoe and other eugenics advocates seeking to eliminate "bad stock" from the American population through legislative means. Wilcox emphatically stated, "The sphere of genealogy and the knowledge gained by study of the subject is not and should not be involved with the legislation in our country." While it might indeed be beneficial to apply the knowledge gained through genealogy research in one's personal life or in the lives of one's family members, e.g. aiding in the selection of a marriage partner or inspiring one to emulate the better traits of one's ancestors, "seeking to apply these principles through the agency of civil government and



legislation” is dangerous and gives to others the “absolute control of our own destinies.”<sup>247</sup> But in challenging the methods of eugenics leaders and advocates, Wilcox certainly did not challenge their ultimate ends or genealogy’s role in achieving those ends. “We should make our own genealogy an aid to ourselves, our families, and our friends,” said Wilcox, using this knowledge to “fortify and defend ourselves against our enemies.”<sup>248</sup> Genealogy, according to Wilcox, provided a way to identify “who’s with us” and who “our enemies” were by making visible the permanent hereditary character of human beings.

But Wilcox also asked, hearkening back to cultural stereotypes about genealogy practice as un-American: “Can we as true Americans” – “democratic citizens of a democratic nation” – “be interested in genealogy in view of the assertion that the subject so largely concerns nobility?”<sup>249</sup> Wilcox clearly answered his question in the affirmative. Reflecting contemporary thinking about heredity, Wilcox argued that things like nobility, royal titles, and social position easily fall victim to circumstance, but a person’s character was enduring. “The kaleidoscopic changes in the fortunes of the world continually and unceasingly bring before the eyes of the observer of men and affairs the changing glories of the scene,” Wilcox told his audience. As the kaleidoscope turns, each single colored prism shifts location, settling in a new position so that novel “combinations of form and color are presented” to the viewer. “But in the never ceasing change,” the individual pieces – the reds and blues, the oranges and greens, the purples and yellows – “remain ever the same.” It is only by their “juxtaposition” and “changing light and

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<sup>247</sup> Charles G. Finny Wilcox, “Genealogy and Its Place in the Affairs of Human Society,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 6 (October 1915): 220.

<sup>248</sup> Charles G. Finny Wilcox, “Genealogy and Its Place in the Affairs of Human Society,” 227.

<sup>249</sup> Charles G. Finny Wilcox, “Genealogy and Its Place in the Affairs of Human Society,” 223.

multiplication” that the view appears different to the viewer. “Our lives, individually and collectively,” Wilcox explained, “are one vast kaleidoscope in which we are each but as one of the brilliant prisms jostling and piling one upon another, ever assuming new positions reflecting the light of new surroundings, but ever the same identical prisms, or units.” Regardless of shifting circumstances or changes in social position, “the character of each” individual “remains the same.”<sup>250</sup>

In the kaleidoscope metaphor, Wilcox offered reassurance to his audience of genealogy enthusiasts that regardless of dramatic changes in American social structure – despite a shift away from small-town community life to the varied hustle and bustle of the growing metropolis, despite the perceived threat that immigration and internal migrations posed to the established social order and dominance of old-stock, white Americans, etc. – their “character” would forever remain solid, certain, fixed, enduring. Genealogy, Wilcox said, reflects “light upon the origin, nature, derivation and character of men,” allowing us to “know their nature and their destinies, as far as may be possible by having an adequate knowledge of their ancestry and origin.”<sup>251</sup> In his kaleidoscope metaphor, Wilcox provides *us* a concise rendering of the bio-racialist underpinnings of the genealogical assumption animating genealogy discourse in the three cases examined above. The discourse generated by the early Daughters of the American Revolution, leading members of the Genealogical Society of Utah, and American eugenics leaders and advocates formulated genealogy as a method of making visible a social bond between ancestors and descendents based on biological lineage – drawing a line of

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<sup>250</sup> Charles G. Finny Wilcox, “Genealogy and Its Place in the Affairs of Human Society,” 224-225.

<sup>251</sup> Charles G. Finny Wilcox, “Genealogy and Its Place in the Affairs of Human Society,” 226.

hereditary inheritance – which could be used in determining one’s location or others in social space. Setting these three variations on late nineteenth and early twentieth century American genealogy discourse side-by-side reveals the importance of context in interpretations of the genealogical assumption and challenges that assumption’s reliance on “blood” as an indicator of the social bond.

The three cases investigated in this portion of the study followed in the antiquarian and emerging professional tradition of genealogy, relying on documented evidence to “scientifically” reveal the continuity between ancestors and descendents. But the social bond conjured up through genealogy differed according to the specific rules employed in each case and to the ends which ancestral knowledge was meant to serve. In the case of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the prospective member used genealogy to draw a line from herself to a distant patriot ancestor – who must have appeared at a particular time and place in American history and rendered service to the patriot cause – and thereby make a claim to membership in the national narrative. In contrast, eugenicists argued that knowledge of social bonds with distant ancestors were less indicative of “who you are” than more recent ancestors, e.g. parents, grandparents, and that both direct and collateral relatives provide evidence of one’s hereditary inheritance and therefore “fitness” for membership in the nation. The Mormon case is marked by the language of construction, e.g. “welding links” between ancestors and descendents, suggesting that temple work informed by genealogy would create eternal social bonds not circumscribed by shared “blood.”

The cases of genealogy discourse investigated above indicate that the genealogical assumption was deployed as a means of conjuring up and intersecting

various kinds of “imagined” communities. It should be recalled that in this context, “imagined” is not synonymous with “not real” but rather signifies a visualization of an unseen but consequential reality. The image of the American nation under threat from outsiders figured significantly in the genealogy discourse of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the eugenics movement. The influences of modernity – industrialization, materialism, immigration – stood in opposition to the heroic models provided by the Revolutionary-era patriots and founding generation. In defining their ancestors as patriots, founders, and heroes who won independence and the land for descendents, the DAR obscured the concrete contributions of non-whites and non-Protestants to the founding and settlement of the United States while claiming present-day rights and responsibilities to protect the principles of the patriots – of which they were the embodiment – from corruption. The eugenicists envisioned the nation as a “patient,” susceptible to infection from degenerative elements, e.g. the feebleminded, criminals, alien races. Through genealogy and family history, a person was determined as “fit” or “unfit,” a benefit or a burden to the nation’s health. Genealogy and family history provided “data” for legislative proposals that would draw clear boundaries between desirable members of the nation and “germs.” The Latter-day Saints’ genealogy practice rested on a larger notion of the “grand family of man,” a divine organization of humanity that genealogy through temple work extended beyond the temporal realm to the spirit world. Each of these cases, different as they are, were united in building on the bio-racialist framework dominant during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Finally, in all three cases, the genealogical assumption is used to conjure up communities of rights and responsibilities, which persons participate in through

genealogy and family history. Genealogy, informed by the genealogical assumption, solicits different responses based on historical context. For the Latter-day Saints, genealogy fulfills a responsibility to bring about the salvation of one's loved ones; it is through *universal* salvation that you and others are joined in eternal bonds. The Daughters of the American Revolution turned to their genealogies to make claims about their rights and responsibilities to perpetuate the values and principles of the founding generation and thereby protect the American nation from harm. Likewise, eugenicists argued that everyone has the responsibility to create a genealogy for the purpose of right-living, in terms of selecting good "stock" for procreation but also for recognizing and combating potential hereditary dangers, e.g. tendencies to alcoholism.

The investigation of these three cases does make it clear that the genealogical assumption was employed in American genealogy discourse during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. All three cases turn to genealogy as a method of making visible a constitutive social bond between ancestors and descendants for various kinds of locating within social space, e.g. defining a person's responsibilities to the nation or situating a person in the "grand family of man." The most useful knowledge to derive from a study of ancestors, wrote the Hochstetler family historian Harvey Hostetler in 1912, is "knowledge of self." During this historical period knowing yourself meant recognizing the consequences of hereditary inheritance. "One does not live for self alone," concluded Hostetler, and if a person "knows his own inherited tendencies, he will early begin that course of training for his children that will best fortify them against these

tendencies that are evil, and aid and strengthen, as much as possible, the tendencies that should be encouraged.”<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Harvey Hostetler, *Descendants of Jacob Hochstetler*, 1912, reprinted in *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 4 (July 1913): 135.

## 2.1 Introduction

“Unearthing bones in the family closet used to be the exclusive domain of the nation’s bluebloods, both would-be and true.” But with “today’s Bicentennial-inspired interest in history” and the “increased awareness of ethnic origins,” observed Mary Alice Kellogg in *Newsweek* in September 1976, “Americans in record numbers are haunting the genealogy sections of their local libraries.”<sup>1</sup> Kellogg was just one of many in both the popular media and academic press who throughout the 1970s and early `80s described a genealogy “craze” sweeping the United States. By the mid-1970s, genealogy was considered one of the fastest growing hobbies in the United States, third only to stamp and coin collecting in popularity.<sup>2</sup> Thousands, noted David Gelman of *Newsweek*, are “crowding into archives” and “journeying overseas in search of a history that predates the Republic or lies well beyond its shores.”<sup>3</sup> Commentary by these and others in popular media, academic journals, and genealogy publications indicate an expansion in the number and increased diversity of the participants in the field of genealogy beginning in the late 1960s and a shift in American genealogy discourse, away from the language of heredity and bio-racial group membership and towards a focus on personal and social identity.

Commentary and observations about the “new genealogy” in news magazines, academic journals, and other outlets indicate that a reformulation of the genealogical assumption occurred in American genealogy discourse between the late 1960s and early

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Alice Kellogg, “Climbing Family Trees,” *Newsweek*, 13 September 1976, 84.

<sup>2</sup> “Swinging in the Family Tree,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 January 1976; “New Interest in Genealogy,” *Washington Post*, 13 December 1976; Bradley Hitchings, “Digging for the roots of your family tree,” *Business Week*, 21 February 1977, 87.

<sup>3</sup> David Gelman, “Everybody’s Search for ROOTS,” *Newsweek*, 4 July 1977.

'80s: through the process of uncovering the everyday lives of one's ancestors, genealogy and family history provides insight into one's identity, understood as the product of group experience, i.e. the historical chain of action leading from ancestors to descendants. The story of your family, their daily struggles and triumphs, is *your* story, and genealogy and family history offers a method of giving the story objective content. In the cases that follow, discourse produced by two minority groups that entered the field of genealogy in the late 1960s – African Americans and Jewish Americans – are examined. African American and Jewish American genealogy are shaped by unique historical experiences – slavery in the case of African Americans, assimilation and the Holocaust in the case of Jewish Americans – which pose obstacles for constructing a genealogy and family history. These cases, therefore, provide an opportunity to think about what constitutes the social bond postulated by the genealogical assumption, how knowledge of that bond can be made known when traditional genealogical sources are hard to come by or do not exist, and how genealogy and family history factors into the production of personal and social identity.

### **“Genealogy for All People”**

American genealogy discourse makes clear that by the mid-1970s the field of genealogy practitioners had widened considerably beyond upper and middle class whites of Anglo-Saxon descent. Most articles in the popular media addressing the “new genealogy” made note of the activity's broad appeal beyond “traditional groups,” generally referring to patriotic societies and the Latter-day Saints. A July 1974 issue of *US News and World Report*, for example, reported that “Increasing numbers of blacks, Indians and children and grandchildren of immigrants – no longer content to submerge



themselves in the ‘melting pot’ of American society – are flocking to libraries to learn more about their own family heritage.”<sup>4</sup> Genealogy, wrote Dorothy Gallagher of the *New York Times* in 1977, “has become democratized. Delving into the past is now . . . the preoccupation of the young, of blacks, of children of recent immigrants.”<sup>5</sup>

While reporters, academics, librarians, and professional genealogists acknowledged the role of the nation’s bicentennial in broadly promoting an interest in history, they laid much of the responsibility for the genealogy “craze,” rightly or wrongly, at the feet of Alex Haley, crediting *Roots* – published in 1976, subsequently dramatized for television in 1977 – with generating interest in family history in general, expanding the number of participants and their racial, ethnic, and age diversity, and transforming genealogy from a practice confined primarily to old-stock upper and middle class whites into a popular leisure-time activity.<sup>6</sup> Gelman of *Newsweek* wrote that Haley “galvanized” the public’s interest in their “personal origins.” *Time*’s Stefan Kanfer wrote, “After Haley’s comet, not only blacks but all ethnic groups saw themselves whole, traceable across oceans and centuries to the remotest ancestral village.”<sup>7</sup> Academic James A. Hijiya, in seeking to account for the “roots phenomenon,” pointed to *Roots* and its message – “Unless we know our ancestors . . . we cannot know ‘who we are’” – as the

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<sup>4</sup> “Quest for Identity: Americans Go on a Genealogy Kick,” *US News and World Report*, 29 July 1974, 41.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Gallagher, “Tracing Their Roots,” *New York Times*, 20 February 1977.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, Alex Haley was everywhere in the mid to late 1970s, appearing on college campuses and genealogy conferences for talks, giving interviews in popular and academic publications, from *Playboy* to the *Negro History Bulletin*, and publishing editorials regarding his family history work. Throughout the 1970s, Haley was clearly the “go-to” guy when a reporter needed a genealogy expert.

<sup>7</sup> Stefan Kanfer, “Climbing All Over the Family Trees,” *Time*, 28 March 1977, 54.

“place to begin.”<sup>8</sup> *Roots* was interpreted by readers of all backgrounds as a “generic romance of ancestry lost and found,” writes historian Matthew Frye Jacobson. Even though Alex Haley’s work concerned the unique experience of African slaves in the United States, “Haley’s narrative was quickly appropriated as a moveable template for considering *anyone’s* familial origins in *any* distant village.”<sup>9</sup> *Roots*, Gelman said, “held out a particular hope” for all Americans that they too “could fill in their own blanks, repair the broken continuity of their history.”<sup>10</sup> Numerous reporters went on to imply that Haley’s work accounted for the increased traffic at genealogical libraries.<sup>11</sup>

The significance of the shift in number and diversity of genealogy practitioners is further indicated by the response generated among those groups long associated with genealogy in the United States: librarians, archivists, and professional genealogists. Librarians were among the first to take notice of emerging trends in the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> Document holding institutions, however, were often less than cooperative to genealogists, often depicted as less than serious female researchers who were either just curious or seeking status through their ancestors. By way of example, in a 1956 issue of *The American Archivist*, writer Howard H. Peckman told his readers that research librarians have a “right to exclude” from their institutions “those whose researches he believes will be superficial or of no real significance.” And Peckman singled out for exclusion the

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<sup>8</sup> James A. Hijiya, “Roots: Family and Ethnicity in the 1970s,” *American Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (Autumn 1978): 549.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 42-43.

<sup>10</sup> David Gelman, “Everybody’s Search for ROOTS,” *Newsweek*, 4 July 1977.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Robin Heffler, “The Flowering of the Family Tree,” *Los Angeles Times*, 21 March 1977; Clayton Jones, “Family roots go as deep as granite in church files,” *Christian Science Monitor* 28 April 1982.

<sup>12</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Ethnic Genealogy: A Research Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), xxiii.

“genealogist who wants family data which will be of interest only to her children and a few relatives.”<sup>13</sup> As the tide of new ancestor hunters began flooding into local and regional libraries and archives in the early 1970s, J. Carlyle Parker attempted to smooth over the difficult relationship between librarians and genealogists. Parker wrote in *Wilson Library Bulletin*, “The average genealogist of the `70s would like to be spared the image of the little old lady that idolizes her ancestors” – perhaps invoking members of the DAR – “just as much as the librarians would like to eradicate the image of the bifocaled, bunned, spinster librarian.”<sup>14</sup>

The situation had clearly changed by 1983, considering that *Library Trends*, a professional publication for librarians and archivists, devoted a special issue to genealogy that year. Russell E. Bidlack, Dean of the School of Library Sciences at the University of Michigan, told librarians, archivists, and other readers of *Library Trends* that attention must be paid to the needs of patrons using institution materials for genealogical purposes. Bidlack pointed to the growth of local and regional genealogical societies and the increase of genealogical materials their members were making available, the explosion of manuals, guides, and periodicals, and the professionalization of the field as reasons that genealogists must be taken seriously.<sup>15</sup> Other articles in the special issue profiled genealogy patrons at The Newberry Library in Chicago, suggested methods for helping African American ancestor hunters, and discussed archival programs designed with genealogy research in mind at the Illinois State Archives.

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<sup>13</sup> Howard H. Peckman, “Aiding the Scholar in Using Manuscript Collections,” *The American Archivist* 19, no. 3 (July 1956): 225. Peckman’s gendered description of the serious researcher and the genealogist should be noted, implying that men do “important” research.

<sup>14</sup> J. Carlyle Parker, “Discrimination Against Genealogists,” *Wilson Library Bulletin* 47 (November 1972): 254.

<sup>15</sup> Russell E. Bidlack, “Genealogy Today,” *Library Trends* 32, no. 1 (Summer 1983): 7-23.

Some professional genealogists responded to the surge of interest in their chosen field by welcoming the public acknowledgement of genealogy's importance while reasserting their dominance over the field. As was the case with librarians and archivists, professional genealogists had long been wary of amateur ancestor hunters, and that apprehension appeared to some extent in popular media reports on the "new genealogy" craze. The message of these professionals to new genealogists: genealogy is hard. A staff member in the Library of Congress' genealogy reading room told a reporter, "Quite frankly, most people come in here looking for an instant family history." If you want an accurate family history, then you must follow a direct line back from the present "using the methods of historical research."<sup>16</sup>

One method of asserting dominance was to counter popular perceptions that genealogy somehow started with Alex Haley. In remarks at the National Genealogical Society's 1978 conference – entitled "Genealogy for All People" – Milton Rubincam surveyed the history of the field and championed the professional tradition of genealogy begun by Donald Lines Jacobus in the 1920s and '30s. "In spite of some assertions I have heard, interest in genealogy is not a recent development stemming from the Bicentennial celebrations and Alex Haley's *Roots*."<sup>17</sup> Rubincam pointed to early American genealogies published in the eighteenth century, the many patriotic heredity-based societies, and the National Genealogical Society itself as evidence of the nation's sustained rather than recent commitment to genealogy. But even Rubincam had to

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<sup>16</sup> William D. Rowe quoted in "Quest for Identity: Americans Go on a Genealogy Kick," *US News and World Report*, 29 July 1974, 42. For another example see the profile of Karen Stinehelfer, a genealogy bookstore owner in New York, in "Digging Up the Family Tree," *New York Times*, 12 October 1977.

<sup>17</sup> Milton Rubincam, "Genealogy for All People," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (December 1978): 244.

acknowledge the role of Haley's book for "stimulating a renewed interest in genealogy," inspiring not only African Americans but also Jews and Mexican Americans, among other ethnic groups, to investigate their ancestry.<sup>18</sup> Almost two years later in the same publication, Meredith B. Colket spoke of how *Roots* "stimulated the man on the street to inquire about the genetic, cultural, and other forces that contribute to making him the person that he is."<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, noted Colket, history departments are recognizing the value of genealogical research in understanding both general American history and the history of the family in American society and culture. While academics had previously looked down on genealogy as a "profitless" enterprise, now "they know that the genealogist in many cases knows far more about record sources than many historians."<sup>20</sup>

**The "new genealogy" is more than a departure from DAR-inspired genealogy.**

In addition to taking notice of the increased number and diversity of practitioners in the field of genealogy, commentators in the popular and academic press also pointed to the changing direction that genealogy research was taking. Clearly with groups like the Daughters of the American Revolution in mind, these writers noted a move away from focusing solely on the "patriot ancestor" and towards investigating all ancestors, understanding their everyday lives, and connecting with an expanded network of living family members. The "new genealogy," wrote historian Samuel P. Hays, is characterized by a "change in perspective." Rather than tracing one's genealogy back to a particular historical moment, such as the Revolutionary War, genealogists are branching out, from the past to the present. Not that family researchers were not interested in filling in the

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<sup>18</sup> Milton Rubincam, "Genealogy for All People," 246.

<sup>19</sup> Meredith B. Colket, Jr., "Some Trends in Genealogy," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (March 1980): 4.

<sup>20</sup> Meredith B. Colket, Jr., "Some Trends in Genealogy," 5.

gaps in their family records, but “There is a growing desire for the researcher to be able to visualize himself not simply as having a remotely historical family connection but as having kinship with hundreds, even thousands, of people tied together by a common ancestry.”<sup>21</sup> One academic, cited in *US News and World Report*, noted that “Everybody has a place in history,” and family histories “constitute the record of the ordinary, anonymous people throughout history who have made the world what it is today.”<sup>22</sup>

Some observers made sense of the new character of genealogy research by drawing a distinction between “genealogy” on one hand and “family history” on the other. Dorothy Gallagher wrote in the *New York Times* that “Genealogy is bare lineage, the tracing from a distant ancestor down through all the branches of a family” while “Family history includes details about the life and times of family members.”<sup>23</sup> John DuLong made a similar distinction in his 1986 sociology dissertation on genealogical organizations. According to DuLong, organizations with a “lineage perspective” – such as the Daughters of the American Revolution – encourage members to trace back only a few particular lines of descent and associate ancestry with status, visualized by badges and certificates and membership in the group. Organizations with a “heritage perspective” are more broadly concerned with identity, emphasizing kinship and culture and family history as a whole.<sup>24</sup> DuLong found that lineage-based organizations such as the DAR were having a more difficult time adjusting to the surge of interest in genealogy

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<sup>21</sup> Samuel P. Hays, “History and Genealogy: Patterns of Change and Prospects for Cooperation,” in *Generations and Change: Genealogical Perspectives in Social History*, eds. Robert M. Taylor, Jr. and Ralph S. Crandall (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 38-39.

<sup>22</sup> John Modell in “Quest for Identity: Americans Go on a Genealogy Kick,” *US News and World Report*, 29 July 1974, 42.

<sup>23</sup> Dorothy Gallagher, “Tracing their roots,” *New York Times*, 20 February 1977.

<sup>24</sup> John P. DuLong, “Genealogical Groups in a Changing Organizational Environment: From Lineage to Heritage” (PhD diss., Wayne State University [Detroit, Michigan], 1986), 302-307.

and the new range of participants than heritage-based organizations because of their limited focus; in other words, lineage-based organizations were finding it difficult to attract new members.

The dichotomy between a “lineage perspective” and a “heritage perspective,” between genealogy and family history, described by DuLong and other commentators is not the most accurate way of describing the contours of the “new genealogy.” Conceptualizing the “new genealogy” – generally symbolized by Alex Haley’s *Roots* – as simply a departure from the genealogy practice associated with the DAR is wrong on two accounts. First, such a description does not acknowledge how activities of patriotic societies and other family history enthusiasts laid the ground-work for contemporary genealogists. The dichotomy obscures the army of professional researchers and amateur enthusiasts who got organized and collected, catalogued, indexed, and made quality information accessible to others over the previous decades. For example, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints undertook massive microfilming projects beginning in the late 1930s, photographing records not only in the United States but throughout much of Europe and made them available through branch centers.<sup>25</sup> The National Archives,

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<sup>25</sup> The Genealogical Society of Utah initiated its microfilming program in the 1930s; anticipating possible war in Europe, the GSU sent Saints to photograph records of all kinds in northern and western Europe. A 1979 article in the *Los Angeles Times* reported at the time that “85 church photographers are poring through birth, death and marriage records; parish registries and land deeds in Poland, India, Sri Lanka, Chile and other countries”; later articles note Mexican and Chinese records among the GSU’s acquisitions. In exchange for access to records, the GSU provided the donor with a set of their microfilmed records. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ Family History Department began establishing Family History Centers, branches of its larger Family History Library, in 1964. The Church also hosted the World Conference on Records in Salt Lake City in 1969 and 1980, providing conference participants with seminars on records preservation and genealogical research. See John Dart, “Genealogy is Vitally Religious, Not Just Hobby, for Mormons,” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 May 1968; Jim Boardman, “Mormon Search for Roots Rivals Haley’s,” *Los Angeles Times*, 29 September 1979; James B. Allen, Jessie

founded in 1934, became a major repository for and provided public access to federal records, including the nation's census and naturalization records. Local, regional, and national genealogical associations produced an archive of family history work through their journals and newsletters. And a number of the most popular "how-to" guides were published in the 1930s and '40s, including Gilbert H. Doane's often cited and constantly republished *Searching for Your Ancestors*, which first appeared in 1937; and Walter Everton's *The Handybook for Genealogists* and *Genealogical Helper* magazine, which both appeared in 1947.

Second and more significant in the context of this inquiry, as I have shown in the previous portion of the monograph, patriotic societies, with their singular focus on the "patriot ancestor," never defined the whole of genealogy practice in the United States. Mormon genealogy discourse of the 1890s through 1930s and the appropriation of genealogy and family studies by the American eugenics movement reveal that the DAR-model was not the only one in circulation. While all three cases illustrated varying degrees of concern about the transmission of character traits through "blood" lines, each case differed, for example, in terms of which ancestor or ancestors were significant. The Daughters were indeed concerned with tracing lineage from a distant patriot ancestor but the eugenicists argued that the ancestors that truly mattered in terms of "who you are" were more recent ones, particularly parents and grandparents. These three cases varied not only in terms of which ancestors mattered but also what information, what "natural facts," mattered most in determining "who you are." For the Mormons, vital statistics were a necessary component for determining the existence of an ancestor in the spirit



world and thus someone capable of being “linked to,” while eugenicists privileged more family history-type information regarding a person’s character, height and weight, or facial structure, e.g. photographs, personal descriptions of a person’s mood or emotional state. A better way to describe the difference between the “new genealogy” and that of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is to highlight its orientation around the notion of identity rather than heredity and bio-racial group membership.

### **Identity as the Product of Group Experience**

A spokesman for the Mormon Family History Library remarked in *Newsweek* that traffic had nearly doubled since *Roots* was televised. The reason people give for coming to the library? “I just want to know who I am.”<sup>26</sup> In the context of the “new genealogy,” ancestral knowledge produced through genealogical research – i.e. the facts of one’s heritage, evidence of continuity between ancestors and descendents – was interpreted primarily through the concept of “identity” rather than biology-based notions of “race,” which was the case in American genealogy discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The notion of identity only came into wide usage in the 1950s as a popular sociology term, one which provided a language for talking about the relationship between the individual and society and a means of critiquing “mass society” and “lost individualism,” e.g. consider the image of the “man in the grey flannel suite” conforming to the dictates of corporate America.<sup>27</sup> Identity is an elastic, multivalent term. But its philosophical meaning, notes historian Philip Gleason, is relatively close to its vernacular

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<sup>26</sup> Donald LeFevre in David Gelman, “Everybody’s Search for ROOTS,” *Newsweek*, 4 July 1977; Mary Alice Kellogg made note of the same point: “the single most compelling reason” for genealogy’s new popularity “comes down to the question: ‘Who am I?’,” in “Climbing Family Trees,” *Newsweek*, 13 September 1976, 84.

<sup>27</sup> Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity’,” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (February 2000): 2; Philip Gleason, “Identifying Identity: A Semantic History,” *Journal of American History* 69, no. 4 (March 1983): 910.

meaning: the continuity of a person or thing across time and changing circumstances.<sup>28</sup>

In the context of the genealogical assumption, the social bond between ancestors and descendents – considered permanent and primary for constituting “who you are” – accounts for the continuity of identity in the face of social forces demanding conformity.

The extent of the continuity often presupposed in the concept of identity has been a source of debate, particularly among scholars in the humanities and social sciences. During the 1950s and `60s, the term identity moved in two opposing directions in social science literature. On the one hand, social psychologists such as Erik Erickson focused on the “interiority and continuity” of identity, considered a deep “psychic structure” shaped through the interaction of a person with his / her environment.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, sociologists, particularly those associated with symbolic interactionism, viewed identity as something “ascribed from without that changes according to circumstance.” While still arguing that identity is formed from the interaction between an individual and his / her (social) environment, these social scientists challenged the notion of continuity of identity.<sup>30</sup> Theorists Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper contrast these two interpretations of identity as “strong” and “weak.” A “strong” interpretation of identity preserves the “emphasis on sameness over time” but may lead to a number of troubling assumptions, such as the notion that identity is something a person or groups “have” whether the person or groups are aware of it or not or that identity is something which can be mistaken. Furthermore, “strong” interpretations of identity “imply strong notions

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<sup>28</sup> Philip Gleason, “Identifying Identity: A Semantic History,” 911.

<sup>29</sup> Philip Gleason, “Identifying Identity: A Semantic History,” 914, 918.

<sup>30</sup> Philip Gleason, “Identifying Identity: A Semantic History,” 918.

of group boundedness and homogeneity.”<sup>31</sup> A “weak” interpretation of identity emphasizes the constructed-ness of identity. However, argue Brubaker and Cooper, constructivist approaches to identity, which repudiate the everyday meaning of identity – “sameness over time” – and require a package of “standard qualifiers indicating that identity is multiple, unstable, in flux, contingent, fragmented,” etc., are often “too weak to do useful theoretical work.”<sup>32</sup> It is important to remember, however, that these represent two poles on a continuum, and that both “strong” and “weak” interpretations may be in play in discussions about identity.

The notion of identity can accommodate a host of conflicting assumptions. On the one hand, identity could be understood in more essentialist-like terms, treated as something “deep” and enduring about a person, even when it remains unknown to the person. Such an interpretation of identity has affinities with ideas about the permanence of ancestry, heredity, and lineage, much as these terms were used in earlier cases of genealogy practice. Genealogy and family history, in this context, can “reveal” what is hidden from view, i.e. one’s “roots,” “who you are,” etc. But the concept of identity also pushes in the direction of constructivism, in which case genealogy and family history provide a method of creating and / or sustaining an identity or losing it.<sup>33</sup> The

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<sup>31</sup> Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” 10.

<sup>32</sup> Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” 11. See for example Carla Kaplan’s description of deconstructionists’ approach to identity as “neither something we possess nor something that defines us, but is instead an *unending* linguistic process of becoming.” Carla Kaplan, “Identity,” in *Keywords in American Cultural Studies*, eds. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University, 2007), 125.

<sup>33</sup> Consider the case of author and genealogist Jeane Eddy Westin, who learned about her grandfather’s illegitimacy through genealogy research. She is quoted as saying, “I had always been identified with his surname, Eddy. Relatives used to tell me ‘You do that just like an Eddy.’ Suddenly, when they admitted his illegitimacy, all that identity seemed to evaporate. I really mourned that for awhile.” David Gelman, “Everybody’s Search for ROOTS,” *Newsweek*, 4 July 1977.

constructivist interpretation shares much in common with what I believe is the nature of genealogical research itself, i.e. the abstraction of materials such as birth and death certificates, letters and diaries, church records, etc. from their original contexts and then their reassembly in a fashion corresponding with the rules of genealogical research. In other words, genealogical research is a *production* of knowledge rather than a discovery of “facts.” Likewise, identity can be thought of as produced and alterable depending upon circumstances. The genealogical assumption includes the idea of a permanent constitutive social bond between oneself and one’s ancestors, but knowledge of that connection is something conjured or created in the process of genealogy and family history research. Considering the constructed nature of identity, it is worth asking: might genealogy and family history reveal the constructed-ness of identity by calling into question previously held ideas about the “permanent” social bond between ancestors and descendants?

Genealogy and family history provides an entry into the lives of past others and group experience – that of family, ethnic groups, nation, etc. During the 1970s and `80s, genealogy and family history research was positioned by those within and outside the field of genealogy as another way of doing history in general. Genealogy, wrote Dorothy Gallagher in the *New York Times*, makes “abstract” history “not only specific but personal,” allowing insight into “those who took the consequences” of the “great who made the speeches and decisions,” namely “our ancestors.”<sup>34</sup> In this regards, genealogy and family history were following trends in academic scholarship toward looking at history “from the bottom up.” The definition of genealogy provided by James Rose and

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<sup>34</sup> Dorothy Gallagher, “Tracing their roots,” *New York Times*, 20 February 1977.

Alice Eichholz in their African American resource book *Black Genesis* points in this same direction:

Genealogy is primarily a quest for identity, not in terms of names or status (although it has been used that way sometimes), but as a basis for finding oneself through understanding the psychological, social, political, and economic forces which influenced one's parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and family life in general.<sup>35</sup>

Treating genealogy and family history in this manner challenges the patriotic society model, which treated genealogy as a tool for claiming status and social and cultural obligations. When genealogy is treated as a method of determining membership in an elite group, there are certainly reasons to be less than factual and less than complete in one's production of ancestral knowledge; but in the context of the "new genealogy," there was no shame in finding "skeletons" in the family closet since even these facts or stories provide insight into the lives of one's ancestors.<sup>36</sup> Scoundrels or kings, *all* provide fodder for making visible an existential chain of action from past others to oneself and identifying where that chain of action links up with or intervenes in the larger movement of history.

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<sup>35</sup> James Rose and Alice Eichholz, eds., *Black Genesis* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1978), 7.

<sup>36</sup> Several observers even suggested that there may be disappointment on the part of the genealogist or family historian if a "skeleton" is *not* found! Harold Felty of the Illinois State Genealogical Society noted "it's a bit of a status symbol to have a verified horse thief in the family," cited in Mary Alice Kellogg, "Climbing Family Trees," *Newsweek*, 13 September 1976; Peter Andrews wrote that genealogy clients "now seem almost disappointed if" researchers "fail to find at least one skeleton in the family closet," in "Genealogy: the Search for a Personal Past," *American Heritage* 33 (August / September 1982): 15.

A good example of the new attitude towards family history is found in the 1974 American history textbook *Generations: Your Family in Modern American History*. The authors wrote in the introduction:

All of us, through our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and other ancestors are a part of history stretching back into a dim and distant past. You will probably search in vain for a really famous person in your family background. Everyone, however, has ancestors whose lives were altered by the forces of history . . . You can begin to understand some of the dimensions of human existence, some of the processes of change by looking at your own family, studying your own particular ethnic group, and examining the community in which you live.<sup>37</sup>

The authors told readers that the “most crucial influence on your life was your own family,” and – reiterating the genealogical assumption – through the “unique story” of their lives, these ancestors will lend insight into yourself.<sup>38</sup> The message of this history textbook and a conclusion drawn from observers of the “new genealogy” craze of the 1970s and `80s was this: everybody has a story, genealogy and family history research will unveil that story and in the process enlighten you about where you fit in a chain of action, in a geographic and historical context.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Jim Watts and Allen F. Davis, *Generations: Your Family in Modern American History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), xi.

<sup>38</sup> Jim Watts and Allen F. Davis, *Generations*, xi-xii.

<sup>39</sup> I am reminded of an Ancestry.com advertising campaign which ask viewers: “Who will you discover?,” implying perhaps that the answer is yourself!

As already noted, a component of the “new genealogy” craze of the 1970s and `80s was the participation of descendents of twentieth century immigrants and minority groups in genealogy and family history research. Discussion of the “new genealogy” in the popular press often pointed to an increased awareness of ethnicity as another impetus for undertaking family history. James Hijiya also noted the growing trend in both popular and academic media to acknowledge the importance of family and ethnicity; “To an unaccustomed degree,” wrote Hijiya, “Americans are conceiving of themselves as products of groups.”<sup>40</sup> Evidence for increased ethnic awareness can be found in changing census data during the 1970s. The Census Bureau asked a sample of Americans to identify themselves by ethnic origin for the first time in 1969, offering seven ethnic categories, including German, English, Irish, Spanish, Italian, Polish, and Russian; out 198.2 million asked, 75 million identified themselves as belonging to one of these categories. When the Census Bureau added additional categories in 1972, 27 million more added themselves to an ethnic category. “By 1972,” writes historian Richard Polenberg, “people were, it appears, more conscious of their national origins or at least more willing to claim affiliation with an ethnic group.”<sup>41</sup> A new interest in ethnic origins was also evident in autobiographies concerning the immigrant experience in America and television and film portrayals of life in the “old country.”<sup>42</sup>

The term “ethnicity” emerged in social scientific discourse during the 1940s as a way to distance anthropology and sociology from the eugenical activities in the United States and Europe and the atrocities arising from Nazi racial hygiene and racial

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<sup>40</sup> James A. Hijiya, “Roots: Family and Ethnicity in the 1970s,” 549.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Polenberg, *One Nation Divisible: Class, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States since 1938* (New York: Penguin, 1980), 243-244.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Polenberg, *One Nation Divisible*, 245-246.; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 30-31.

purification. Ethnicity stressed the cultural rather than the biological, opening the road for the “liberal universalism” that dominated American political culture from World War II through the late 1960s.<sup>43</sup> A “belief in the fundamental unity and sameness of all humanity,” which resonated in the wake of awareness of Nazi atrocities and the budding modern Civil Rights Movement, waned as some African American activists began questioning whether integration was a desirable goal and placing increasing value on “Black Pride” and as the national government instituted programs to push integration along.<sup>44</sup> Other ethnic and racial groups, taking a cue from the African American Civil Rights Movement and its visible cultural nationalism, organized and began demanding their own presence at the national table, e.g. the American Indian Movement.

The “ethnic revival,” it is argued, depended upon institutional support. Jacobson notes that “eclipsed in the emphasis on interior mindscapes and the psychic self-discoveries of the roots trip is the fact that the new ethnicity ramified outward through the larger units of social organization,” e.g. voluntary associations, government bureaucracies.<sup>45</sup> He points to the re-emergence of ethnic organizations during the 1970s; while earlier forms of political ethnic organizations had waned during World War II, during the “ethnic revival” older groups were re-formed and new groups developed which emphasized cultural activities, i.e. discovering your ethnic past.<sup>46</sup> The Ethnic Heritage Studies Program, passed in 1972 as an amendment to the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, offers another example of state-supported “ethnic

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<sup>43</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 32.

<sup>44</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), 58.

<sup>45</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 48.

<sup>46</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 48



revival.”<sup>47</sup> Genealogy and family history should be seen as another method of accessing ethnic heritage, and the genealogy market expanded to meet those interested in their ethnic “roots.” For example, *Ethnic Genealogy: A Research Guide*, edited by Jessie Carney Smith, appeared in 1983, providing resources for Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics; George R. Ryskamp’s *Tracing Your Hispanic Heritage* was published in 1984; and Doane revised his *Searching for Your Ancestors* again in 1980 to include a section on “ethnic origins.”<sup>48</sup>

Ethnic identity – its nature, permanence, etc. – operates like identity in general in that it is open to different readings. On the one hand, notes Gleason, ethnicity can be regarded “as a given, a basic element in one’s personal identity that is simply there and cannot be changed,” something “primordial.” On the other hand, ethnicity can also be considered a “dimension of individual and group existence that can be consciously emphasized or de-emphasized as the situation requires.”<sup>49</sup> The two interpretations lead to different readings of what ancestral knowledge “means.” Does documented evidence of parentage and ancestry define “who you are” essentially or does genealogical knowledge provide just another facet of self which one may or may not chose to perform? Does this question even exist for everyone? While a visibly “white” person may chose to “play Irish,” a visibly dark-skinned person does not necessarily have such an option and must experience the concrete consequences of ascribed ethnic or racial identity. Evidence

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<sup>47</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 54; see also, Philip Nobile and Maureen Kenney, “Congress Passed an Ethnic Heritage Studies Program Act in 1974 to Encourage Looking Backward,” *New York Times*, 27 February 1977.

<sup>48</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Ethnic Genealogy: A Research Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983); George R. Ryskamp, *Tracing Your Hispanic Heritage* (Riverside, CA: Hispanic Family History Research, 1984); Gilbert H. Doane and James B. Bell, *Searching for Your Ancestors*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

<sup>49</sup> Philip Gleason, “Identifying Identity,” 919.

indicates that contemporary genealogy discourse pulled in both directions. Despite its references to the language of identity, ancestral knowledge remained to some extent informed by ideas about heredity, the transmission of character traits, even though it was not oriented around notions of hierarchical racial and lineage groups.

## Discussion

How do we account for the increased interest in ancestry, culminating in the 1970s? And why would the genealogical assumption be a factor? The turn to identity through genealogy was considered by some as a response to deeper social and cultural problems facing the United States. In seeking to explain the reasons behind the “new genealogy,” commentators in popular media and academic journals turned to the idea that genealogy and family history provided an “anchor” in a chaotic social and cultural environment. “Some social historians,” noted a 1974 *US News and World Report* article, interpreted the “new genealogy” as “part of America’s groping for the past as an anchor in today’s turbulent, fast-changing time.”<sup>50</sup> Gelman wrote in *Newsweek* that a case could be made that “Vietnam, Watergate, political assassinations, racial upheavals, the pains of economic growth” have “left Americans feeling it is no longer special to be American,” and therefore “they reach out for a firmer identity.”<sup>51</sup>

Genealogy discourse of the period suggested that stability, continuity, and rootedness could be achieved through family history. In contrast to cases investigated in the first portion of this study, which used genealogy to justify exclusion of others from membership in the nation or from a chosen lineage group, the cases that follow show

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<sup>50</sup> “Quest for Identity: Americans Go on a Genealogy Kick,” *US News and World Report*, 29 July 1974, 41.

<sup>51</sup> David Gelman, “Everybody’s Search for ROOTS,” *Newsweek*, 4 July 1977.

genealogy and family history to be a constructive process of healing historical experiences of “rupture” between ancestors and descendents and producing evidence of inclusion in broader “imagined communities.” Richard Cohen reflected in a 1977 article in the *Washington Post* on genealogy’s pull, asking “Why should I care that I can’t trace my ancestry back more than two generations – that it plunges into the darkness of the Eastern European ghetto sometime around the turn of the century? . . . why is it not enough to be just what we are?” Perhaps it is the “geographical rootlessness of American society” or perhaps the kind of rootlessness where “you can be in one business one year and another the next year and lose, in the process, the ability to define yourself by what you do.” Or perhaps there just comes a time in a person’s life when he wants to see himself as “part of a process, to know that something came before and something will come afterwards.”<sup>52</sup> Peter Andrews reasoned in his 1982 article for *American Heritage*: “We feel as people always do, especially when they are feeling lost and perhaps a little frightened. We want to go home.”<sup>53</sup>

“Going home” through genealogy and family history, however, was more difficult for some than for others. In the next two sections, African American and Jewish American genealogy discourse of the 1970s and `80s will be investigated, which will allow a number of questions to be addressed. What happens when the genealogical assumption is formulated around “identity” rather than biological “race”? Does “race” enter into African and Jewish American genealogy discourse? How does it affect interpretations of ancestral knowledge? African American and Jewish American

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<sup>52</sup> Richard Cohen, “The Mystery of Heritage: Why Is It Important?; Heritage’s Mystery: Why Do We Care?,” *Washington Post*, 27 January 1977.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Andrews, “Genealogy: The Search for a Personal Past,” 17.

genealogy researchers face a series of obstacles in accessing knowledge of the social bond between themselves and their ancestors due to the unique historical experiences of these groups. These discourses were largely defined by this theme: the process of ancestral knowledge production has been hampered by a history of discrimination and persecution but it is possible to assemble the “natural facts” necessary to produce a genealogy, to establish or re-establish the continuity between ancestors and descendants, to get “grounded” and learn “who you are.” Furthermore, both cases of genealogy discourse described genealogy as a method of forming, expressing, and challenging a social identity. By placing African American and Jewish American genealogy discourses side-by-side, two interpretations of what the “natural facts” of ancestry reveal become apparent. The two cases offer different frameworks for interpreting ancestral knowledge due to the unique histories of both groups.

The final section of the monograph will further complicate the reformulation of the genealogical assumption by examining the discourse surrounding genetic genealogy in the United States. Discourse on genetic genealogy, hearkening back to the use of genealogy by the American eugenics movement, adds more “scientific” and explicitly “biological” terms to conceptualizations of the genealogical social bond and interpretations of ancestral knowledge. How does “biological” evidence of a social bond between people, i.e. shared DNA, affect the genealogical assumption at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Genetic genealogy expands the range of information available in the production of ancestral knowledge and therefore opens the possibility for established identities to be challenged with new, “natural” facts. Does genetic evidence

of a social bond expose the constructed nature of identity? Does it challenge or alter “who you are” by illuminating genetic-based social bonds?

## 2.2 African American Genealogy Discourse

### Introduction

Among the first rules of genealogy is this: begin with yourself and work backwards in time to your parents, your grandparents, your great-grandparents, and so on. From my privileged position in American society and culture, as a white, educated male, it is difficult to imagine *not* being able to at least get enough “natural facts” of ancestry to construct a basic genealogy, yet this was (and perhaps remains to some extent) the situation for many people in the United States. My mind turns to Frederick Douglass, the famed American abolitionist and political activist of the nineteenth century. Douglass began his well known 1845 autobiography with this: “I have no accurate knowledge of my age.” In fact, wrote Douglass, “I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday.” The “white children could tell their ages,” Douglass wrote, and “I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege.”<sup>54</sup> Or, in the context of a project on genealogy in the United States, one cannot forget Alex Haley’s 1976 narrative of Kunta Kinte, “the African” tied by name to his grandfather and clan. Enslaved on a Virginia plantation, Kinte struggles to retain his name and other remnants of his African past as his owner demands he be called by the name Toby. In both examples, the markers of personal identification – birth date, name – the barebones of a genealogical account of self and one’s ancestry either did not exist or were under assault;

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<sup>54</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845; repr., New York: Penguin Classics, 1987), 47.

the system of American slavery stripped black slaves of such markers of personal identification and historical time and sought to break family bonds as a means of increasing its control over them. Recovery of genealogical markers and reconstruction of ancestral knowledge stand at the center of African American genealogy discourse during the late 1960s through the present.

African American genealogy discourse is examined in two phases in this monograph. The first phase addressed immediately below occurred roughly between the late 1960s through the early 1980s and concerns the formation of African American genealogy as an organized practice, with the creation of guides, genealogy associations, and other collective efforts to aid African American family history researchers in overcoming genealogical “brick-walls” resulting from slavery, passing, and other forms of ancestral knowledge destruction brought about by persecution and discrimination. An analysis of African American genealogy discourse during this first phase suggests the following formulation of the genealogical assumption: your personal identity is shaped by the historical experiences of your ancestors who survived slavery and made a life for themselves following their emancipation; genealogy and family history serves as a method for seeing one’s ancestors and oneself as contributors to American society and culture. Genealogy and family history research, argued commentators, played a political role by recovering and reasserting the roles of one’s African American ancestors in the founding, settlement, and building of the United States, thereby instilling pride in oneself as an African American.

The second phase, wrapped into the discussion of genetic genealogy, is addressed in section 2.4 of the monograph. Over the last decade, African American genealogists

and family history researchers have turned to DNA testing as a means of bridging not only the “brick-wall” of slavery but also the Middle Passage and identifying an ancestral geographic origin on the African continent. As evidenced by discourse on genetic genealogy in particular and its use by Americans of African descent in particular, genetic genealogy, with its reference to biology, complicates the genealogical assumption by pulling, on the one hand, in the direction of essentialism, in the sense that genetic evidence somehow reveals one’s unalterable essence, represented by shared biogenetic substance, i.e. DNA. On the other hand, the complicated history of race-mixing – forced and unforced – results in DNA disrupting settled identities and long-held family lore, thereby revealing the constructed nature of identity. We begin in this section, though, with African American genealogy discourse produced in the post-Civil Rights Movement moment.

**Alex Haley’s *Roots* provided a problematic model for black genealogists.**

Alex Haley’s *Roots* must be acknowledged as a significant factor in shaping American genealogy discourse in general beginning in the mid-1970s, but Haley also needs to be credited for providing a model, if not an unproblematic one, for African American genealogists during the period. While Haley’s work was not the only impetus behind the 1970s genealogy craze, and black genealogy did not suddenly spring forth at its publication, *Roots* was a visible symbol in American popular culture of the “do-ability” of black genealogy and shaped discussions of what African American genealogical research could and should look like. Alex Haley published *Roots* in fall 1976, but he began his family history research over a decade earlier, in 1962. Prior to *Roots*, Haley was best known as the co-author (and editor) of *The Autobiography of*

*Malcolm X* and an occasional writer for *Reader's Digest*. The publishers of *Reader's Digest* became aware of Haley's family history project in 1966 and provided funds for the author to travel to the African nation of Gambia. In return, Haley published two condensed portions of the finished work in the May and June 1974 issues of *Reader's Digest*, two years before the complete work was released.<sup>55</sup> *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* – a subtitle added to the book for its 1976 publication by Dell – remained on *The New York Times* best-seller list for five months. Based on its tremendous popularity among not only African Americans but Americans in general, a television version was broadcast in January 1977. By the time the complete mini-series had aired, roughly 130 million viewers, nearly three out of every five television viewers – meaning an audience well beyond just African Americans – had watched some portion of *Roots*.<sup>56</sup>

In the context of an inquiry into the genealogical assumption, it is appropriate to take note of Haley's message to readers that finding one's roots, that going back to "the source," is in essence the same as finding oneself. But equally important is Haley's research methodology and his presentation of that methodology – the collection of evidence and its interpretation – which placed oral history in the forefront. According to Haley in a May 1974 piece prepared as a lead-in to the condensed presentation of *Roots*, the best-seller's story began on the front porch of his grandmother's home in Henning, Tennessee, as she and other matriarchs of the family talked in the evening about "pieces and patches of family history, passed down across the generations by word of mouth."

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<sup>55</sup> See also Alex Haley, "My Furtherest-Back Person – "The African," *New York Times Magazine*, 16 July 1972, 13-16.

<sup>56</sup> David Chioni Moore, "Routes: Alex Haley's *Roots* and the Rhetoric of Genealogy," *Transition* 64 (1994): 4-7.



The matriarchs traced their story back to “the African” who arrived in “Naplis” and was sold into slavery in Virginia. Through these front porch gatherings at his grandmother’s, the young Haley became a bearer of an oral tradition: “she pumped that saga into me as if it were plasma, until I knew by rote the story of the African, and the subsequent generational wending of our family through cotton and tobacco plantations into the Civil War and then freedom.”<sup>57</sup>

Haley began documentary research using traditional genealogy methods as an adult, but his presentation of the origins of *Roots* foregrounds the importance of the family’s oral tradition in uncovering the truth of that tradition. Following retirement from the military, Haley visited the National Archives and other document holding institutions, searching through census records and wills until seven generations had been fully documented. But “The African” remained a mystery. Haley began conversing with passing Africans in the United Nations lobby, repeating the few phrases remembered from the front porch – “Kin-tay,” “Kamby Bolongo,” etc. – in hopes of identifying the geographic origin of the sounds. Haley did not meet with much success until a friend put him in contact with a linguistics professor at the University of Wisconsin who identified the phrases as possibly Gambian. Haley traveled to Banjul, Gambia and learned about the griots, the oral archivists of clan and tribal history; those he spoke with promised to find the Kinte griot and did. Upon Haley’s return to Gambia, he was brought to the Kinte griot and listened to the Kinte lineage and family history. The griot’s story matched the facts Haley knew from his grandmother’s front porch gatherings. Based on the griot’s information, Haley proceeded to London to uncover the name of the slave ship which

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<sup>57</sup> Alex Haley, “My Search for Roots: A Black American’s Story,” *Reader’s Digest*, May 1974, 74.

transported Kinte to the United States, the Lord Ligonier, which landed in Annapolis, Maryland in September 1767.

Research methodology figured prominently in a number of popular and scholarly reviews of the book and its dramatization for television. Oral history played a paramount role in not only Haley's research but also in his narrative about that research, i.e. Haley the young boy sitting on his grandmother's porch listening to stories about "the African," and in discussing *Roots*, Haley also expounded on the virtues of oral history as a method for African Americans seeking to recover their own pasts.<sup>58</sup> One reviewer, Doris Wilkinson, made clear the centrality of oral history to Haley's entire family history project, remarking that Kunta Kinte "shared a symbolic and cognitive linkage" with his descendents, including Haley, who maintained a "functional unifying identification with their past" through the sharing of sounds and words, e.g. "Kamby Bolongo" and "Kintay."<sup>59</sup> Haley's use of shared family stories warrants attention because it stands in opposition to the admonition against the use of family stories by professional genealogists, who privilege documentary evidence in the creation of ancestral knowledge. Indicative of Haley's thoughts about oral history as evidence was his response to a question from a genealogy conference attendee concerning characters and other material added for the televised version of *Roots*. While Haley acknowledged that some characters were fictitious, the episode where Kunta Kinte is beaten into saying his name was Toby "was absolute fact; I heard it from the time I was little." Such a response

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<sup>58</sup> For example, see Alex Haley, "Black History, Oral History, and Genealogy," *The Oral History Review* 1 (1973): 1-25 and Alex Haley and James D. Walker, "How to Trace Your Heritage to Africa: The Voice of Experience – Paper 903" in *World Conference on Records, Volume 11* (Salt Lake City: Corporation of the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1980).

<sup>59</sup> Doris Wilkinson, "The Black Family: Past and Present: A Review Essay," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 40, no. 4 (November 1978): 833.

would surely have made many professional genealogists cringe. Oral tradition, while often used by genealogists to identify potential research leads, was and is considered by professional genealogists as not credible evidence in and of itself. Doane wrote in *Searching for Your Ancestors*, “don’t accept as gospel truth all that your Great-Aunt Hettie, or Uncle Abijah, tells you about the history of the family.” Sometimes older people confuse one person for another, and some family members may consciously or unconsciously embellish the facts.<sup>60</sup> But Haley’s documentary research was not without criticism either.

*Roots* posed a problem to the field of professional genealogy, wrote Elizabeth Shown Mills and Gary Mills, because it was “advertised as an authentic family history.” Mills and Mills, well known and respected in the field of professional genealogy, undertook an assessment of claims made by Haley in *Roots* determining many of them to be false. They noted, for example, that Haley’s griot source in Gambia was found to be unable to recite the Kinte lineage, or did so in a way at odds with Haley’s account, by two different researchers. Furthermore, documentary evidence challenged Haley’s description of the lives of slaves on the Waller plantation in Virginia and the parentage of Kizzy, claimed by Haley to be the daughter of Kunta Kinte. As Mills and Mills saw it, the problem with *Roots* was that it had been accepted “unquestionably by legions of neophyte black genealogists, naïve as all genealogists initially are, who believe *Roots* should be the model for their own work.” Mills and Mills believed genealogy to be a “legitimate field of study, of the same value to society as geography or diplomatic

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<sup>60</sup> Gilbert H. Doane and James B. Bell, *Searching for Your Ancestors: The How and Why of Genealogy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 31. Doane did, however, feel the need to mention Haley, describing his case as one where the “history has been faithfully and accurately memorized and handed on from generation to generation,” 38.

history.” Therefore, “it must be governed by” a single “set of standards” that “apply to everyone,” including Alex Haley.<sup>61</sup>

While the discourse surrounding *Roots* produced by popular and academic reviewers cannot indicate the degree to which “neophyte black genealogists” accepted “unquestionably” the claims made by Haley – and this is broad claim that deserves scrutiny – there are examples of reviewers calling Haley’s historical project in question. For example, Carole Meritt of *Phylon* wrote that while “*Roots* may be regarded as the first serious challenge to existing popular mythology on the black man’s past – that blacks are without a past, without a culture of their own and therefore, an inferior and unworthy people,” she walked away from *Roots* believing it to be a good story but not necessarily good history. In focusing entirely on the survival of the Kinte clan in America, argued Meritt, Haley obscured the historical African American experience of slavery; the other slaves in the book “appear as a collection of unattached individuals,” implying that “most slaves lived outside the bonds of kinship and marriage,” a notion challenged by then-recent scholarship on the slave experience.<sup>62</sup>

Despite questions about Haley’s research methods – and later charges of plagiarism – *Roots* clearly attempted to marry family history with other efforts to help African Americans perceive themselves as contributors to the American national story. Haley explicitly situated the *Roots* project in the context of rising black consciousness in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the transformation of aspects of the African American historical experience once considered shameful, particularly slavery, into

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<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth Shown Mills and Gary B. Mills, “The Genealogist’s Assessment of Alex Haley’s *Roots*,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (March 1984): 36.

<sup>62</sup> Carole Meritt, “Looking at Afro-American Roots,” *Phylon* 38, no. 2 (1977): 211-212.

sources of ethnic pride. Haley wrote that he titled the book *Roots* because it is not only his family's story but also "symbolizes the history of millions of American blacks of African descent." Haley aspired for *Roots* to be a "buoy for black self-esteem," and a number of commentators read *Roots* in just that way.<sup>63</sup> For example, Ruskin Teeter, writing in *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, hoped *Roots* would join the classics of American literature and thereby "help alleviate the prevailing belief among black people that preponderantly American history has been written by whites."<sup>64</sup> In *The Journal of Negro Education*, reviewer Nancy L. Arnez wrote that Haley had "helped mightily to destroy the chilling terror of ignorance of who we are as a people" and "given our proud heritage back to us."<sup>65</sup>

But to be clear, African American genealogy did not begin and end with *Roots*. Alex Haley must be credited with energizing the idea of African American genealogy as a viable activity, but Haley's experience was unique, well-funded, part fictionalized, and hardly the common experience of amateur family historians who faced significant problems in their research due to the system of American slavery and history of persecution and discrimination in the United States. The historical "brick-wall" circumstances for Americans descended from African slaves are captured by this question: Whose lives are worth documenting? For many white Americans living in the United States well into the twentieth century, African American lives were less than fully human, categorized with cattle, chickens, and goats on the plantation or tenement: nameless, family-less, incapable of reasoned associational life. In a practice once called

<sup>63</sup> Alex Haley, "My Search for Roots: A Black American's Story," 78.

<sup>64</sup> Ruskin Teeter, review of *Roots*, by Alex Haley, *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (Winter 1976): 373-374.

<sup>65</sup> Nancy L. Arnez, "From His Story to Our Story: A Review of 'Roots'," *Journal of Negro Education* 46, no. 3 (Summer 1977): 367-372.

the “science of personal identification,” the inability to document a life is roughly tantamount to saying that life did not exist, at least in the realm of genealogy practice, a thought which again highlights the classist and racist character of historical genealogy practice.<sup>66</sup> African American genealogy discourse positioned the practice as a means of re-valuing oneself by discovering the “lost” history of one’s ancestors, their struggles and contributions to American history; the act itself, in post-Civil Rights Movement America, was considered by some to be – explicitly or implicitly – a political one, challenging older narratives that erased African Americans from the national story and potentially reshaping what it means to be black in America.

**Black genealogy was defined as both distinct and ordinary.**

Over the course of the 1970s and `80s, African American genealogy became an organized activity. The discourse indicates that African American genealogy and family history was situated as both unique and ordinary by its practitioners and commentators. On the one hand, African American genealogy was defined as a sub-field of genealogy defined by a series of “distinct and unique” research problems, which leaders in the field sought to address. For instance, due to illiteracy and restrictions on their education and writing, slaves were largely unable to create their own records. Therefore, to locate a slave ancestor, genealogists must navigate through not only records concerning slaves, such as the slave schedules in the United States Census, but also records concerning their owners. In census and legal documents, slaves were generally listed without names, though often with gender and ages, among other pieces of property on plantation records.

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<sup>66</sup> Henry R. Stiles defined genealogy as the “science of personal identification” in *A Hand-Book of Practical Suggestions for the Use of Students in Genealogy* (Albany, NY: Joel Munsell’s Sons, 1899), 7.

A slave's name often changed when that slave was sold, and upon release slaves may or may not have taken their previous owner's surname. Sexual liaisons, both forced and unforced, often produced children who were either unacknowledged or whose parentage was incorrectly recorded. Passing further complicates the task of tracing an ancestor, who may be categorized as "Negro" in one document and "white" in another.

So these very significant research problems exist for black genealogists, but on the other hand, methodology tends, among genealogists, to reign over any unique circumstances. Geneticist Thomas H. Roderick argued that racial emotion should not "mar" one's research and one should not assume that "American Negroes and American Caucasians are genealogically distinct." Rather, genealogy concerns objective knowledge; the "genealogy of all Americans is the concern of American genealogists."<sup>67</sup> James D. Walker, genealogy specialist at the National Archives and a leader in the growth of African American genealogy as a distinct sub-field of the practice, defined "black genealogy" as the "documented history of the ancestry of a person or family of African descent, pure or mixed." Walker certainly acknowledged that the exact methods, techniques, and resources of black genealogy research may be different from those researching white ancestors and may draw on family tradition for clues, but Walker sticks to *method* as the source of objectivity and "truth."<sup>68</sup>

Educational resources geared specifically to descendents of African slaves slowly accumulated over the course of the 1970s and early '80s. Numerous guidebooks were published to address the distinct problems associated with African American genealogy.

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<sup>67</sup> Thomas H. Roderick, "Negro Genealogy," *American Genealogist* 47 (1971): 88.

<sup>68</sup> James D. Walker, *Black Genealogy: How to Begin* (Athens: University of Georgia Center for Continuing Education, 1977), 1-2.

Among the earliest “how-to” books were Charles L. Blockson’s *Black Genealogy* and Walker’s *Black Genealogy: How to Begin*, both published in 1977 in the wake of the *Roots* phenomenon. These were followed by others, including Johnnie M. Day’s 1983 *A Quick-Step in Genealogy Research* and David H. Streets’ 1986 *Slave Genealogy*.<sup>69</sup>

Books such as *Black Genesis*, published in 1978, provided readers with lists of available resources for their individual geographic areas.<sup>70</sup>

Black genealogy had been handicapped by a history of institutional discrimination, which often meant sub-standard education for black students and denial of access to library and archival materials. By the 1970s, however, libraries and archives were taking steps to better serve their African American patrons and organizations were formed to aid those needing resources and instruction.<sup>71</sup> The Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society was founded at the National Archives in October 1977.

Among the first board members were Walker, who served as president, and famed genealogist Milton Rubmincam as treasurer.<sup>72</sup> The Society’s journal began publication in summer 1980. Walker wrote in the first issue, “We will publish articles of quality and

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<sup>69</sup> Charles L. Blockson, *Black Genealogy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977); Johnnie M. Day, *A Quick-Step in Genealogy Research* (Minneapolis: North Star and Day, 1983); David H. Streets, *Slave Genealogy: a Research Guide with Case Studies* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1986); James D. Walker, *Black Genealogy: How to Begin* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Center for Continuing Education, 1977).

<sup>70</sup> James Rose and Alice Eichholz, eds., *Black Genesis* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Company, 1978); see also Sandra M. Lawson, ed., *Generations Past: A Selected List of Sources for Afro-American Genealogical Research* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1988).

<sup>71</sup> See for example essays by librarians and archivists: Minnie K. Peebles, “Black Genealogy,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 55, no. 2 (April 1978): 164-173; Joyce E. Jelks and Janice White Sikes, “Approaches to Black Family History,” *Library Trends* 32, no. 1 (Summer 1983): 139-159.

<sup>72</sup> For a regional example: the Mid-West Afro-American Genealogical Interest Coalition was formed in Kansas City, Missouri in 1991, building on an earlier organization called the Missouri Historical Genealogical Society, which was established in 1984 to specifically promote African American genealogy.



scholarship and prove that America has a neglected race which has made a major contribution.”<sup>73</sup>

Walker cited increased leisure time, funds, and access to documentary resources – made available through the work of scholars and genealogists – as major reasons for the surge of interest in African American genealogy.<sup>74</sup> Following in the footsteps of Haley and new social historians, budding black genealogists turned to oral history as a fundamental method and legitimate tool in creating family histories.<sup>75</sup> Michael Searles, for example, relied heavily on the recollections of his grandmother’s boarder Mary Williams for information regarding the family; Williams provided Searles with a “wealth of details” which could then be pursued in “actual records.” Searles placed Mary in the role of African griot, “people who’ve kept a whole body of information with authenticity.”<sup>76</sup> In addition to turning to their neighbors or relatives in hometowns and family reunions, records of particular significance to African American genealogy were being made available and indexed. Of particular importance were (and continue to be) the records of the Freedmen’s Bureau and Freedmen’s Bank.<sup>77</sup>

### **African American family history challenged the dominant national narrative.**

Certainly part of the enthusiasm for genealogy and family history among African Americans can be traced, as was the case for many during the late 1970s and early `80s,

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<sup>73</sup> James D. Walker, “A Message from the President,” *Journal of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1980): 2.

<sup>74</sup> Harriet Jackson Scarupa, “Black Genealogy,” *Essence*, July 1976, 57, 85.

<sup>75</sup> Peggy Murrell, “Black Genealogy – Despite Many Problems, More Negroes Search for Their Family Pasts,” *Wall Street Journal*, 9 March 1972.

<sup>76</sup> Harriet Jackson Scarupa, “Black Genealogy,” *Essence*, July 1976, 84.

<sup>77</sup> See Ken Ringle, “Genealogist Describes Blacks’ Clues to Past,” *Washington Post*, 17 February 1983; Robert Scott Davis, Jr., “Freedmen’s Bureau and Other Reconstruction Sources for Research in African-American Families, 1865-1874,” *Journal of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 171-176.

to the Bicentennial and *Roots*, but there was also a potential political motivation to the practice of African American family history, an aspect that was acknowledged to some extent in the discourse concerning black genealogy. For example, Peggy Murrell of the *Wall Street Journal* described the increased interest in genealogy and family history among blacks, particularly on college campuses, and their desire to collect stories from elderly relatives about “what it was like to be black in America in the immediate post-slavery years.” Murrell reported, “Many view the burgeoning interest in genealogy among blacks as a rechanneling of the impetus – sparked by the Black Power movement of the 1960s – to reaffirm the positive aspects of black culture.”<sup>78</sup> Genealogy and family history, some argued, enabled African Americans to look at themselves anew. “I knew we had a culture and a past to be proud of,” wrote Blockson in his introduction to *Black Genealogy*, and “I set out on a very personal mission to prove that contention through my own family history.”<sup>79</sup> Knowledge produced through family history research on the everyday lives of one’s ancestors – their survival through slavery and Jim Crow segregation, through migrations and world wars – could be a source of pride to their descendants. But more than that, such knowledge challenged the meaning of African American identity in American society and culture. Rather than seeing African Americans as inconsequential in American history and a pathological component of American society, genealogy and family history enabled African Americans to challenge their absence from the American national narrative.

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<sup>78</sup> Peggy Murrell, “Black Genealogy – Despite Many Problems, More Negroes Search for Their Family Pasts,” *Wall Street Journal*, 9 March 1972; see also “New Interest in Genealogy,” *Washington Post*, 13 December 1976.

<sup>79</sup> Charles L. Blockson, *Black Genealogy*, 6.

The political dimension of African American genealogy discourse of the period should be situated in the context of a larger popular and scholarly re-valuing and reinterpretation of the African American historical experience in the United States initiated by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and `60s and its more cultural dimension of Black Pride. Prior the 1960s and `70s, descendents of African slaves – much like other non-whites, non-male, non-Protestants – were largely absent from the “official timeline” of United States history and certainly did not appear as major contributors to American society and culture.<sup>80</sup> Over the course of the 1960s, however, partially in response to civil rights movements of all kinds and partially due to the increased presence of minorities among the ranks of professional academics, humanities and social science scholars took greater interest in the day-to-day lives of minority groups in the United States, including the lived historical experiences of African slaves and African Americans. Social historians in general and African American Studies scholars in particular, for example, brought to light the importance of the Works Project Administration slave narratives in published collections such as Norman R. Yetman’s *Life Under the Peculiar Institution*, published in 1970, and George Rawick’s *The American Slave: A Collective Autobiography*, published in 1972. Works such as Eugene D. Genovese’s 1976 *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World Slaves Made* and Herbert Gutman’s 1977 *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* challenged claims by government bureaucrats and others who traced the inability of African Americans to succeed in American society to group “pathology” rather than institutional racism and discrimination.

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<sup>80</sup> The phrase “official timeline” is appropriated from Elizabeth Freeman, “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography,” *Social Text* 23, nos. 3-4 (Fall / Winter 2005): 57-68.

The growing interest in the everyday lives and historical experience of ordinary African Americans also took place in the context of an emerging critique and push-back against the social welfare-state, of which blacks were often painted as the primary beneficiaries. The 1965 report prepared by Daniel Patrick Moynihan for the Department of Labor, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” when leaked to the public, shaped the debate around African American social inferiority around the breakdown of the black family. The 1970s also saw a resurgence of biology-based explanations, in contrast to environmental accounts, for black inferiority and social immobility. According to Daniel J. Kevles, no single publication did more to generate a renewed interest in biology-based studies of social achievement than Arthur R. Jensen’s 1969 article “How Much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement?” Jensen challenged the prevailing “nurture-oriented response” to why black individuals did not generally flourish in American society. Jensen asked whether “environmental deprivation,” the dominant explanation for why blacks scored lower on intelligence testing, might be wrong; Jensen argued that since races were physiologically, anatomically, and biochemically different, it was reasonable to “hypothesize that genetic factors may play a part” in the divergence intelligence testing scores.<sup>81</sup> Such claims reached a cultural fever-pitch with the widely read *Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, written by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray and published in 1994. Black genealogy and family history produced visible examples of African Americans surviving and sometimes flourishing in American society and culture, calling claims about racial inferiority and pathology into question.

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<sup>81</sup> Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (1985; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 269-270.

African American genealogy and family history served as an individualized version of the scholarly re-evaluation of the African American experience, a process which enabled people to situate themselves and their ancestors in the national story. If, as Walker wrote, the “Published United States history has only recently acknowledged the contributions made by blacks to the development of our country,” and “relegated to insignificant status” the “importance of family life and roles played by parents in black American families, churches, and community and national life,” then genealogy offered a method of challenging that history.<sup>82</sup> Genealogy and family history produced knowledge of ancestors who through their daily lives – sometimes thriving, sometimes struggling – participated in the economic, political, and cultural life of the nation. Paul Sluby, for example, discovered his great-great-grandfather fought in the Civil War and his great-grandfather was a prosperous barber; Estelle Meeks also found a Civil War soldier in her lineage as well as a former slave owned by a signer of the Declaration of Independence.<sup>83</sup> For the most people, however, their ancestors were not illustrious but rather examples of lives intertwined with the larger forces of history.

While on their own these ancestors were minor historical players, they together called into question the absence of African Americans from the American national story. James Rose and Alice Eichholz, for instance, recounted the family history of the Jacksons, which included two slaves who were taken to Oregon with their owner, who migrated there in 1846. Since slavery was illegal in Oregon, the existence of these two slaves would not have been found in any slave census conducted in 1850; knowledge of

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<sup>82</sup> James D. Walker, “A Message from the President,” *Journal of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1980): 1; see also “Black Genealogy to Be Discussed at Brigham Young,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 26 July 1979, 5.

<sup>83</sup> Harriet Jackson Scarupa, “Black Genealogy,” *Essence*, July 1976, 57; Barbara Gamarekian, “Interest by Blacks in Genealogy is Gaining,” *New York Times*, 11 October 1976, 16.

their transport to Oregon would have gone unknown without the will of their previous owner. “How many other blacks have been disregarded in the recounting of history, but can be found through concerted genealogical research,” asked Rose and Eichholz?<sup>84</sup> “Through the rediscovery of each individual family’s heritage,” wrote genealogist David H. Streets, “our chances of rediscovering our national heritage are greatly enhanced”; the stories of individual families contribute to a “better understanding and truer portrait of the American people as a whole.”<sup>85</sup>

African American genealogy also served to reshape one’s personal identity as black in America. Elaine B. Pinderhughes’ 1982 article “Black Genealogy: Self Liberator and Therapeutic Tool” provides an example of how genealogy and family history was situated as a method of transforming the personal meaning of black racial identity. Pinderhughes wrote that the aims of her research were to understand the “race-related experiences that had occurred within the family” and to “unify and make whole the fragmented identity imposed on my family, and on many Black families, as the legacy of racism.”<sup>86</sup> Her mother’s family was not discussed when Pinderhughes was a child because of its history of mixed-race relationships. This side of the family, Pinderhughes wrote, was “shrouded in shame.”<sup>87</sup> Pinderhughes, a professor of Social Work influenced by Bowen Family Systems Theory, gathered evidence from census and legal documents and organized the information to determine the “values, roles and behavioral interactions that might shed some understanding of past and current family behavior and the

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<sup>84</sup> James Rose and Alice Eichholz, eds., *Black Genesis*, 9.

<sup>85</sup> David H. Streets, *Slave Genealogy*, 4.

<sup>86</sup> Elaine B. Pinderhughes, “Black Genealogy: Self Liberator and Therapeutic Tool,” *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 52, no. 2 (March 1982): 93.

<sup>87</sup> Elaine B. Pinderhughes, “Black Genealogy: Self Liberator and Therapeutic Tool,” 94.

relationship between the two.”<sup>88</sup> The “missing information” and “confusion” concerning family relationships, argued Pinderhughes, was the result of a history of “racism and exploitation” in the United States which obscured parentage; this confusion was expressed in “family structure,” e.g. black children with multiple black and white fathers.<sup>89</sup>

Pinderhughes’ research also provided much to be proud of in the lives of her mother’s ancestors: “They were hardworking people with a strong sense of responsibility” who supported each other and neighbors. For example, “When the white fathers remained irresponsible and abandoning, family members loved and cared for these children.”<sup>90</sup> Pinderhughes’ research made visible the continuity between her and her mother’s family, which formally was “cut-off” by family shame and ignorance. In uncovering the “reality of life” for her mother’s family “during the nineteenth century,” Pinderhughes replaced the “shame, ignorance and confusion surrounding” her sense of heritage with “pride, knowledge, and understanding.”<sup>91</sup>

African American genealogy and family history challenged prevailing cultural beliefs about the absence of blacks as active contributors to the nation’s history by making visible the lives and historical experiences of their ancestors. Genealogy and family became a method for African Americans to stake a claim to membership in the American nation, much in the same way the Daughters of the American Revolution and other patriotic-heredity based societies did beginning at the end of the nineteenth century. The difference between the two cases of genealogy discourse revolves around the DAR’s

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<sup>88</sup> Elaine B. Pinderhughes, “Black Genealogy: Self Liberator and Therapeutic Tool,” 95.

<sup>89</sup> Elaine B. Pinderhughes, “Black Genealogy: Self Liberator and Therapeutic Tool,” 99.

<sup>90</sup> Elaine B. Pinderhughes, “Black Genealogy: Self Liberator and Therapeutic Tool,” 100-101.

<sup>91</sup> Elaine B. Pinderhughes, “Black Genealogy: Self Liberator and Therapeutic Tool,” 105-106.

use of genealogy as a method of excluding concrete participants from the American narrative while African American genealogy discourse stressed the potential of family history to create a more inclusionary narrative. (Incidentally, in 1977 Karen Farmer became the first known black member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, having traced her ancestry back to William Hood, a soldier in the “patriot army.”)<sup>92</sup> Considering the history of racial mixing in the United States – referring to both forced and unforced sexual liaisons between whites and blacks – the intervention into American history through genealogy and family history did more than merely say “we were here.” It also said “we are you.” Consider the example of Minnie S. Woodson of Washington D.C. who traced the Woodson family line to Thomas Woodson, founder of the “self-sufficient farm community” Berlin Crossroads, Ohio. Thomas Woodson, however, was believed by the family to have been the son of Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings.<sup>93</sup> Walker made a similar claim in a February 1977 *Chicago Tribune* article, suggesting that both Jefferson and George Washington fathered children with their slaves.<sup>94</sup> Claims of sexual relationships between Jefferson or Washington and their slaves intertwine black history and the national founders on an intimate level.

The history of racial mixing in the United States not only calls into question the dominant national narrative of white heroic founders and leaders but might also demand re-conceptualizing what it means to be “black in America.” After nearly two decades of research, Thelma Short Doswell concluded that “being called ‘black’ is not enough.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> William K. Stevens, *New York Times*, 28 December 1977.

<sup>93</sup> Joann Stevens, “The District’s Woodson Family: A History of Pride, Patriotism and Determination,” *Washington Post*, 1 December 1977.

<sup>94</sup> Joseph Egelhof, “Genealogy: What ‘Roots’ has wrought,” *Chicago Tribune*, 25 February 1977.

<sup>95</sup> Douglas C. Lyons, “A Family Tree Listing More Than 3,300 Relatives,” *Washington Post*, 11 March 1976.



Doswell's family history research was profiled in *The Washington Post*, *Ebony*, and *Essence* in the mid-1970s and illustrates yet another possible interpretation of the consequences of ancestral knowledge production for personal identity. Doswell began her genealogy research in 1957 after attending a reunion of her mother's family, the Blackwells. She interviewed family members then turned to documentary research, leaving "no stone unturned." According to Doswell, her distant maternal ancestor, a female slave from the Soninke tribe in present day Senegal named Ama, was sold at a slave auction in 1735 to a Virginian plantation owner named James Blackwell. Jenny, a descendent of Ama, married a Sauk Indian who adopted the Blackwell name. Doswell responded to the discovery of mixed-race heritage by defining her identity as "Afruamerind" – a term combining African, American Indian, and European – which she copyrighted in 1962. Doswell also produced material images testifying to her mixed racial heritage and complicated identity, including a coat-of-arms and a gigantic 9' by 12' canvas family tree.<sup>96</sup> In Doswell's case, genealogy complicated personal identity and required the construction of a sense of self as multiple.

### **Discussion**

"Black Americans have a history of which they can be proud," wrote Walker in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society*. Black Americans "have enriched America with a quality of people who have contributed to our nation's heritage and growth," and key to continued participation is a "self-awareness that blacks have something to contribute to society, our state, and our

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<sup>96</sup> Michele Burgen, "How to Trace Your Family Tree," *Ebony*, June 1977, 54.

country.”<sup>97</sup> Aspects of the historical experience of African Americans once considered shameful – slavery, Jim Crow, etc. – became a source of pride, as experiences that one’s own ancestors survived and situations in which they contributed despite discrimination and persecution. Elizabeth Clark Lewis, commenting on her genealogical research in a 1976 article in *Essence*, asserted that “I’m not ashamed of my slave heritage or of having slave ancestors. This country was built by slaves, by their labor.”<sup>98</sup> Drawing on the genealogical assumption, the discourse produced by leaders in African American genealogy during the 1970s and early `80s argued that genealogy and family history provided a way for African Americans to locate themselves in the national narrative, for challenging representations of blacks as inconsequential or pathological and refiguring African Americans as contributors to American society and culture.

African American genealogy discourse is shaped by unique “brick-wall” circumstances resulting from a history of slavery, persecution, and discrimination. These historical group experiences make it difficult for African American genealogists to draw a chain of action between ancestors and descendents, as the documentary evidence disappears into the fog of slavery. African American genealogists filled in the gap through less traditional documentary sources, such as Freedmen’s Bureau records or slave schedules in the federal census, and organized for the purposes of aiding others in researching family history.

Perhaps equally significant, the emergence of African American genealogy signaled the most visible expression of the democratization of genealogy practice in the

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<sup>97</sup> James D. Walker, “A Message from the President,” *Journal of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1980): 1.

<sup>98</sup> Harriet Jackson Scarupa, “Black Genealogy,” *Essence*, July 1976, 87.

United States. In other words, genealogy as a method for claiming membership in the nation based on ancestry was treated in a more egalitarian manner, not as a practice reserved for “blue bloods” or the wealthy. Though it must be remembered, genealogy still required time and resources, i.e. access to records, the ability to use the records, services, etc. In other words, there are class dimensions to any discussion of genealogy, regardless of ancestral background, which have an impact on the cultural resources for conceptualizing kin relationships.

## 2.3 Jewish American Genealogy Discourse

### Introduction

Social and culture critic Irving Howe, commenting on all the “middle-class Jewish ladies intent on discovering their family genealogies,” suggested that if these ladies were actually serious about their pursuit, “they would first try to learn their people’s history.” If they did, these ladies would realize it “hardly mattered whether they came from the Goldbergs of eastern Poland or the Goldbergs of western Ukraine.”

Arthur Kurzweil and Steven Siegel, editors of the Jewish genealogy periodical *Toledot*, thought Howe was dead wrong. Jewish genealogy, asserted Kurzweil and Siegel, is a “serious activity,” one that enables Jews to “enter” the history of the Jewish people through their families. The genealogy of each Jewish family contributes to a “more accurate and enriching” picture of the entire historical experience of the Jewish people.<sup>99</sup>

The journalist Dan Rottenberg described the consequences of Jewish genealogy in much the same way as Kurzweil and Siegel. Genealogy, wrote Rottenberg, brings the

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<sup>99</sup> Arthur Kurzweil and Steven Siegel, “To Our Readers,” *Toledot* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1977): 2-3.

“realization that each of us is merely a link in a chain.” Though individual people may one day be forgotten, the “contribution we made to the chain, however slight, will always be there, and” – making an appeal to personal responsibility – “as long as the chain exists, a piece of us will exist, too.”<sup>100</sup> The discourse produced by Kurzweil, Rottenberg, and other enthusiastic Jewish American genealogists during the 1970s and `80s describes Jewish genealogy as a method for American Jews to claim membership in the Jewish people. An individual person’s genealogy, they argued, is a unique expression of the collective historical experience of the Jewish people and evidence of its survival in conditions of diaspora. Genealogy and family history makes visible the continuity between a single Jewish person and the Jewish people and produces knowledge of a relationship of debt and obligation between a person and his or her Jewish ancestors.

**Numerous cultural factors shaped organized Jewish American genealogy practice.**

An interest in Jewish history and genealogy was not necessarily new in the United States in the 1970s. For example, an upper class Jewish ancestral organization known as “The One Hundred” was founded in 1888; its members traced their ancestry back to the passengers of the ship *Saint Charles*, which delivered the first Jews to the shores of the United States in 1654.<sup>101</sup> The American Jewish Historical Society was established in December 1892, during the heyday of patriotic societies and pioneer associations. Walter Max Kraus created the Society of Americans of Jewish Descent during the 1930s and even published a journal, a single issue, entitled *The Saint Charles*, in 1935. The American Jewish Archives was founded in 1948.

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<sup>100</sup> Dan Rottenberg, *Finding Our Fathers: A Guidebook to Jewish Genealogy* (New York: Random House, 1977), 5.

<sup>101</sup> Peter Andrew, “Genealogy: The Search for a Personal Past,” *American Heritage* 33 (August / September 1982): 15.

Rabbi Malcolm H. Stern, however, occupies the “center” of modern Jewish genealogy. Sallyann Amdur Sack, one of the founders of *Avotaynu: The International Review of Jewish Genealogy*, called Stern the “Father of Jewish Genealogy” in the United States.<sup>102</sup> Interestingly, Stern did not enter the field of genealogy through his own family but rather through a research project on the early settlement of Jews in the United States. Stern came to prominence for *Americans of Jewish Descent*, a compendium of genealogies of early Jewish Americans, published in 1960. In summarizing the findings of *Americans of Jewish Descent*, Stern spoke of genealogy as an aid to historians, biographers, sociologists, and anthropologists in understanding the settlement and everyday lives of American Jews during the colonial period and early years of the republic. In this regard, Stern was clearly in line with the scholarly current of new social history.<sup>103</sup> Though Stern’s proposed use for his findings was not in conflict with the use of genealogy and family history as a means to personally connect with the Jewish historical experience, as espoused by Rottenberg, Kurzweil, and others, Stern’s conception of genealogy remained scholarly rather than wrapped up in the creation of Jewish identity.<sup>104</sup> Stern’s reputation as a scholar and genealogist led to his term as the first Jewish president of the Federation of Genealogical Societies and an invitation to join the American Society of Genealogists, making him the first Jewish member of that

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<sup>102</sup> Sallyann Amdur Sack, “Jewish Genealogy: The Past 25 Years,” *Avotaynu* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 3.

<sup>103</sup> While not citing Stern, the 1986 volume edited by historian Robert M. Taylor and genealogist Ralph S. Crandall, *Generations and Change: Genealogical Perspectives in Social History*, further examines the use of genealogy and family history as a research method in the academic study of social history, particularly as a means of generating evidence about the development of local communities and migration.

<sup>104</sup> Malcolm Stern, “The Function of Genealogy in American Jewish History,” in *Essays in American Jewish History* (Cincinnati: The American Jewish Archives, 1958), 69-98, see particularly 71-72.

organization. Stern provided younger Jewish genealogy enthusiasts a common point of reference, a central point around which to build a Jewish genealogy movement. Building on Stern's work, Stephen Birmingham explored additional early Jewish American lives in his 1971 *The Grandees: American's Sephardic Elite* and Neil Rosenstein published his book on famous Jewish rabbinical families, *The Unbroken Chain: Biographical Sketches and the Genealogy of Illustrious Jewish Families from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* in 1976.

Two cultural forces in particular help account for the emergence of modern organized Jewish genealogy in the United States: first, a growing appreciation for ethnic identity and the immigrant experience in the United States and second, an emerging "Holocaust consciousness." Jewish immigrants to the United States had to pay the "price of admission" to become Americans, a price which often included, among other things, discarding some customs and cultural traditions that shaped Jewish life in Europe, abandoning Yiddish and learning English, and sometimes Americanizing names.<sup>105</sup> As part of a national surge of interest in ethnic origins and the immigrant experience, Jewish Americans also sought to work past the assimilation experience to find ethnic "roots." Irving Howe's 1976 *World of Our Fathers*, for example, offered a social and cultural history of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Jewish immigrants living in New York's Lower East Side. And the *havurah* movement provided an avenue in the 1960s

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<sup>105</sup> Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 298-300.

and `70s for young, primarily college educated, Jewish Americans to explore Jewish religious traditions without the limits and formality of a synagogue.<sup>106</sup>

Some Jewish Americans turned to genealogy and family history to reassert their ethnic and religious heritage. Stern explained the surge of interest in genealogy among Jewish Americans by pointing to a new valuing of the immigrant experience. Jewish genealogy is “respectable now because we do have sufficient Jews of the third and fourth generation to become keenly interested in their ‘roots.’”<sup>107</sup> Rottenberg too pointed to “Hansen’s Law,” that “What the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember.” In the 1970s, Rottenberg wrote, “American Jews of my generation were eager to assert their roots and preserve their heritage before the traces of our European backgrounds were lost to posterity forever.”<sup>108</sup> Paul Cowan’s memoir *An Orphan in History: One Man’s Triumphant Search for His Roots* recounts his 1970s experience of recovering and “synthesizing” the “Old World heritage” of his ancestors with the America that shaped his consciousness.<sup>109</sup> Cowan turned to both family history and active involvement in the Jewish faith to repair an identity “fragmented” by differences between his parents’ Jewish cultural heritage – one Eastern European, one German – the oppositional pulls of Judaism and dominant American culture, and his own experience of the collapse of the New Left.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Hasia R. Diner, *A New Promised Land: A History of Jews in America* (2000; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 133-134.

<sup>107</sup> Malcolm Stern, “A Conversation with Malcolm Stern (Part Two),” *Toledot* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1977): 8.

<sup>108</sup> Dan Rottenberg, “Tracing Jewish Ancestors: A Pioneer Looks Back,” *Avotaynu* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 4.

<sup>109</sup> Paul Cowan, *An Orphan in History: One Man’s Triumphant Search for His Roots* (1982; repr., New York: Doubleday, 1990), xi.

<sup>110</sup> Paul Cowan, *An Orphan in History*, xii.

Another significant factor shaping Jewish American genealogy was the emergence of “Holocaust consciousness.” According to some scholars, prior to the 1960s, the Holocaust did not figure as a unique historical event of monumental significance for all Jews around the world as it does now, nor was the Holocaust even a part of the “American vocabulary.”<sup>111</sup> Survivors of the Nazi genocide arrived in the United States to a culture and society weary of war and energized by the possibilities of the post-war economic boom. The United States government focused on the growing communist threat, seeing the Soviet Union as the new totalitarian enemy, and sought Germany’s support; this meant moving past Nazi atrocities rather than publicly reminding Germany of its part in war and genocide. Lynn Rapaport notes that the Holocaust was not conceptualized as a discrete event until the early 1960s. Previously, the Nazi genocide was publicly discussed in very general terms, such as “catastrophe” or “disaster,” rather than as a personal experience of human suffering.<sup>112</sup> Representations of the victims of Nazi genocide in American popular culture emphasized their heroism in the face of persecution rather than the agony they endured. *The Diary of Anne Frank*, published in 1952, provides a well known example. When *The Diary of Anne Frank* was translated into a Broadway play, the playwrights downplayed the Frank family’s “Jewishness” and celebrated the young Anne’s sense of hope in humanity.<sup>113</sup> The arrest of Adolf Eichmann, an architect of the Nazi’s systematic destruction of European Jewry, in Argentina in 1960 and his 1961 trial in Jerusalem was considered a major news event not

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<sup>111</sup> See for example Kirsten Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares: Early Holocaust Consciousness and Liberal America, 1957-1965* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2006); Deborah E. Lipstadt, “America and the Memory of the Holocaust, 1950-1965,” *Modern Judaism* 16 (1996): 195-214.

<sup>112</sup> Lynn Rapaport, “The Holocaust in American Jewish Life,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism*, ed. Dana Evan Kaplan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 191.

<sup>113</sup> Deborah E. Lipstadt, “America and the Memory of the Holocaust, 1950-1965,” 196-197.



only in Israel but also in the United States. In the context of the Eichmann trial, survivors of the Nazi genocide were not “heroes” per se but “expert witnesses” with “crucial testimony” to offer the public.<sup>114</sup> Still, it was not until the late 1960s, particularly in the wake of the 1967 “Six Day War” between Egypt and Israel, that the Holocaust came to occupy a central place in the construction of Jewish identity, when the Holocaust became seen as a “historical experience that set Jews apart” from other social groups.<sup>115</sup> Both factors – the value of the immigrant experience and the Holocaust – zero in on the lives of everyday people, victims and survivors, rather than illustrious early immigrants to America’s shores, as was the case with Stern and Rosenstein’s work.

In contrast to more “lineal” focused works produced by Stern and Rosenstein, younger Jewish American genealogists such as Rottenberg and Kurzweil were more concerned with the everyday lives of their ancestors.<sup>116</sup> Dan Rottenberg published the first Jewish genealogy “how-to” book, *Finding Our Fathers*, in May 1977. His “search for roots” began with loss. “I first got into the subject at my grandmother’s funeral in 1958, when I found myself copying names and dates from relatives’ tombstones,” Rottenberg wrote. From this followed visits with living relatives and eventually a book, which when sent to far flung relatives around the world elicited even more information. Rottenberg found existing genealogy handbooks completely useless in tracing his exclusively Jewish ancestry; his ancestors were not to be found in “church records”; they arrived in the United States long after the Revolutionary War and had nothing to do with

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<sup>114</sup> Lynn Rapaport, “The Holocaust in American Jewish Life,” 191-194.

<sup>115</sup> Lynn Rapaport, “The Holocaust in American Jewish Life,” 199.

<sup>116</sup> Rachel E. Fisher makes this observation in her dissertation, “A Place in History: Genealogy, Jewish History, Modernity” (PhD diss., University of California – Santa Barbara, 1999), 63.

coats-of-arms.<sup>117</sup> Like African American genealogy and family history, the unique historical experiences of Jews in the United States and abroad affected both what types of documents could provide evidence of parentage and the availability of these resources. The success of *Finding Our Fathers*, noted Rottenberg years later, showed others that a market existed for Jewish genealogy publications and made the argument that tracing one's Jewish ancestors was indeed possible, that not all had been lost during the Nazi Holocaust and the descent of the Iron Curtain that followed.<sup>118</sup>

Rottenberg's handbook was followed in 1980 by Arthur Kurzweil's guide *From Generation to Generation*.<sup>119</sup> Kurzweil launched his family history research at the New York Public Library in spring 1970. Kurzweil was looking for a book on the small Polish town where his father was born. He grew up hearing stories about his grandparents' lives in Dobromil and often imagined himself walking its streets. "I dreamed about the shtetl of Dobromil a lot, and though I grew up in a suburban town in New York, I considered Dobromil home."<sup>120</sup> Against expectations, the Jewish Division of the Library did have a book on Dobromil, and the book included a picture of Kurzweil's grandfather. "The discovery of that photograph said one thing to me – one thing that changed my life," wrote Kurzweil. The photograph indicated to Kurzweil that he had "a past and a history," which he could "discover" if he wanted.<sup>121</sup> For Kurzweil, the photograph of his grandfather in Dobromil was concrete documentation of the presence of his family in time and place. Journalist Jane Saladof, in an article on the growing interest in genealogy

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<sup>117</sup> Dan Rottenberg, *Finding Our Fathers*, 4-5.

<sup>118</sup> Dan Rottenberg, "Tracing Jewish Ancestors: A Pioneer Looks Back," *Avotaynu* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 3-6.

<sup>119</sup> Arthur Kurzweil, *From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Personal History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1980).

<sup>120</sup> Arthur Kurzweil, *From Generation to Generation*, 20.

<sup>121</sup> Arthur Kurzweil, *From Generation to Generation*, 23-24.

among Jewish Americans, remarked on the role of people such as Rottenberg and Kurzweil: “What Alex Haley did for his own family, and thereby for black history, Rottenberg, Kurzweil, and an increasing number of family chroniclers are doing for theirs, and thus for their fellow Jews,” showing that historical events which sought to erase Judaism were not insurmountable and that one’s individual story contributed to a more complete understanding of the Judaism itself.<sup>122</sup>

Rottenberg, Kurzweil, and others recognized the necessity for a community which would promote the collection of resources and help others in their genealogical pursuit. The Jewish Genealogical Society of New York was formed in October 1977.<sup>123</sup> Also in 1977, the first Jewish genealogy periodical, *Toledot* – the Hebrew word for “generations” – began publication under the editorship of Arthur Kurzweil and Steven W. Siegel. Though *Toledot* ceased publication in 1980, it was followed in 1985 by *Avotaynu*, under the editorship of Gary Mokotoff and Sallyann Amdur Sack. *Avotaynu* – a Hebrew word meaning “our fathers,” in the collective rather than personal sense – has since become a leader in the field of Jewish genealogy around the world, publishing guides, maps, and other resources for Jewish family history research.

Like the discourse on African American genealogy, a feature of the modern Jewish genealogy discourse is the recognition that Jewish genealogy is “do-able,” that methods exist for overcoming the severed ties to family in Europe. In the discourse, the Nazi genocide of European Jews stands on the one hand as a motivation to undertake family history research – to remember and honor victims and survivors – but the

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<sup>122</sup> Jane Saladof, “Some call it roots, by us it’s Yichus,” *Moment* 3 (October 1977): 44.

<sup>123</sup> Among the founding members were Malcolm Stern, Neil Rosenstein, Steve Siegel, Arthur Kurzweil, and Dan Rottenberg.

Holocaust also is the major, though not the only, “brick-wall” facing those investigating Jewish ancestry. In the introduction to his research guide, Rottenberg noted that because they have been “chased from country to country, their records obliterated, their synagogues and cemeteries destroyed,” most Jews “assumed that it’s simply impossible to trace their ancestries back more than a few generations, and so they haven’t even tried.”<sup>124</sup> Communist governments in Europe sometimes withheld records and other information. Rottenberg remarked, for example, about the “tenuous” condition of the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland as “relations have frozen between Israel and the Communist bloc.” Documents in the Soviet Union might be obtained by making requests for official records through the American Embassy in Moscow.<sup>125</sup> The message offered to potential Jewish family history researchers by Rottenberg, Kurzweil, and other leaders in the organized Jewish genealogy movement was this: despite some obstacles, resources and methods are available for producing a Jewish genealogy and family history. The “Cossacks and the Nazis are no longer at the door; the Spanish Inquisition is over; the Crusaders have vanished; Pharoah [sic] is dead.” Like other Americans living in the “relative security” of the twentieth century, said Rottenberg, Jews are using genealogy to “discover who we are.”<sup>126</sup>

Through the organizations they founded and their publications, Stern, Kurzweil, Rottenberg, and other Jewish American genealogists sought to fill in the gap in knowledge concerning research methods and Jewish genealogy resources throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. Stern provided bibliographies of Jewish genealogy resources in

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<sup>124</sup> Dan Rottenberg, *Finding Our Fathers*, 5.

<sup>125</sup> Dan Rottenberg, *Finding Our Fathers*, 113, 118-120.

<sup>126</sup> Dan Rottenberg, *Finding Our Fathers*, 4.

National Genealogical Society and American Society of Genealogists' publications, including "how-to" books, compendiums, and reference works.<sup>127</sup> *Toledot*, the journal edited by Kurzweil and Siegel, provided readers with information regarding the availability of records, e.g. Jewish cemetery records, Holocaust documents, relevant sources microfilmed by the Mormon Family History Library. The journal also posted book reviews, genealogy conference advertisements, and queries submitted by readers. *Avotaynu* picked up where *Toledot* left off when it ceased publication. Mokotoff, in collaboration with Randy Daitch, developed a Jewish soundex system over 1985 and 1986. The Mokotoff-Daitch soundex system built on the 1918 system developed by Robert C. Russell. There are often multiple spellings of the same name, and many times names are misspelled when recorded. To overcome this problem, Russell numerically coded English language phonetics and used these numbers to index names. Mokotoff and Daitch recognized that Eastern European names complicated the Russell system and made adjustments, making a soundex system suitable for use by American Jews whose ancestors resided in that region.<sup>128</sup>

### **Jewish family history is a tool for strengthening Jewish identity.**

African American and Jewish American genealogy discourse of the 1970s and early '80s indicates a shared concern among both groups for the everyday lives of their ancestors, but Jewish American genealogy discourse, in contrast to African American genealogy discourse, was not oriented around claims to membership in the American

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<sup>127</sup> See Malcolm H. Stern, "Jewish Migrations," in *Genealogical Research: Methods and Sources*, Vol. 2, ed. Kenn Stryker-Rodda (Washington D.C.: American Society of Genealogists, 1971); and "New Sources of Jewish Genealogy," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 66 (December 1978): 281-284.

<sup>128</sup> Gary Mokotoff, "Proposal for a Jewish Soundex Code," *Avotaynu* 1, no. 1 (January 1985): 5-7; Gary Mokotoff, "Soundexing and Genealogy," *Avotaynu* online, <<http://www.avotaynu.com/soundex.htm>> (accessed June 2010).

national narrative, nor in the nation-state of Israel for that matter. As opposed to Zionists, for whom land plays a significant role in defining Jewish peoplehood, the discourse produced by leading figures in Jewish American genealogy and family history – Rottenberg, Kurzweil, and others – situated genealogy and family history as a method of orienting a person in relation to Jewish peoplehood and the de-territorialized, diasporic historical experience of the Jewish people. Each individual's family history, it was argued, is a unique, personalized aspect of the collective Jewish historical experience, an idea captured in the recognition that the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust is one Jew, six million times.<sup>129</sup> Each and every one of these individual victims is a link in a chain of action – from parents to offspring – that genealogy and family history make visible to oneself and others. According to the discourse produced by leaders in American Jewish genealogy, family history serves as a method for honoring and perpetuating the memory of one's ancestors, an imperative expressed in numerous aspects of the Jewish religious tradition, e.g. the Haggadah read over Passover; genealogy and family history fulfills the obligation to remember because it produces knowledge of continuity between a person and her or his ancestors and evidence of Jewish presence in circumstances where they were actively being effaced.

Stern, Rottenberg, Kurzweil, and others all noted that Jews were historically a genealogy-people, genealogy being a practice which figures considerably in the Jewish religious tradition and sustains a sense of peoplehood by visually manifesting

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<sup>129</sup> Arthur Kurzweil expresses the same idea in the title of the third chapter of *From Generation to Generation*.

continuity.<sup>130</sup> But the purposes to which genealogy and family history were put in the Jewish religious tradition were hardly unified. Ancient Jews were a patriarchal and tribal society, noted Kurzweil, and the biblical genealogies served to “document and affirm membership in a particular clan.” But the biblical genealogies also sought to tie all human beings back to a common origin as the progeny of Adam and Eve.<sup>131</sup> Genealogies were necessary for proving a person’s qualifications for service in the Temple and for fulfilling marriage requirements regarding family purity, yet the Talmud also cautioned against “ancestor worship” and family pride, noting that “A learned bastard takes precedence over an uneducated high priest.”<sup>132</sup> Kurzweil and Rottenberg also noted the religious concept of “merit of the fathers” – the notion that benefits or curses may be derived from the actions of one’s ancestors – as a motivation for righteous living in their discussions of biblical genealogies.<sup>133</sup> But Kurzweil told his Jewish readers that “Among the uses and abuses of genealogy and ancestor-consciousness in the Bible and Talmud, we find the unifying principle that knowledge of one’s ancestors has been important since the beginning of our people.”<sup>134</sup>

However, the Jewish historical experience – both distant persecution in Spain during the Inquisition and more recent genocide in Europe – equally called into question whether Jews should be undertaking genealogy research at all. The Holocaust in particular posed significant questions for Jewish genealogists about the wisdom of conducting genealogical research – documenting the parentage of children, their birth and

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<sup>130</sup> See for example Malcolm Stern, “A Conversation with Rabbi Malcolm H. Stern (Part Two),” *Toledot* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1977): 9; and Dan Rottenberg, *Finding Our Fathers*,

<sup>131</sup> Arthur Kurzweil, *From Generation to Generation*, 55.

<sup>132</sup> Arthur Kurzweil, *From Generation to Generation*, 59-60.

<sup>133</sup> Arthur Kurzweil, *From Generation to Generation*, 61; Dan Rottenberg, *Finding Our Fathers*, 61.

<sup>134</sup> Arthur Kurzweil, *From Generation to Generation*, 62.

death dates and other vital statistics – because these were the same kinds of “natural facts” used by Nazis to determine Jewish ancestry and draw up detailed lists of the Jewish inhabitants of conquered Europe. During a presentation on Jewish genealogy to a group of junior high students, a student raised a “troublesome question” to Kurzweil: “Didn’t the Nazis use Jewish genealogy for bad reasons?” The question, wrote Kurzweil, “challenged everything: the research, the record keeping, the facts, the charts, the whole endeavor.”<sup>135</sup> Kurzweil reasoned in response that reacting to the fear of a future Holocaust by refraining from conducting genealogy and family history research meant Jews were letting others control their access to their past. Genealogy, Kurzweil told the student, is like a turned-up rake in the yard, a tool transformed into a weapon when stepped on; just because genealogy had been used as a weapon by National Socialism, it should not be dismissed as a tool to “deepen Jewish identity.”<sup>136</sup> However, while the Nazis may no longer be “at the door,” to paraphrase Rottenberg, the memory of their actions – evidenced by the student’s question and Kurzweil’s choice to publish the question and the response on at least two instances – remained close.

Another potential danger facing Jewish genealogists in the 1970s, particularly prior to the emergence of Jewish specific genealogy research facilities, were ramifications from encountering the Mormon genealogy enterprise and the Latter-day Saints’ massive collection of records. The Church’s collection and indexing of Jewish materials from institutions in Eastern Europe and North America of course raised questions for Jewish genealogists concerned about not only the accumulation of

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<sup>135</sup> Arthur Kurzweil and Steven Siegel, “To Our Readers,” *Toledot* 1, no. 4 (Spring 1978): 2; Arthur Kurzweil, “Finding Jewish Roots: Should we hide our past?,” *Jewish Week*, 15 July 1978, 41.

<sup>136</sup> Arthur Kurzweil, “Finding Jewish Roots: Should we hide our past?,” *Jewish Week*, 15 July 1978, 41.



information about Jews by non-Jews but also the Church's clear proselytizing activities. Kurzweil and Siegel addressed the issue in multiple issues of *Toledot*. "What should our relationship to the Mormon Church be?" And "what are the Mormons doing with Jewish records, and should we use those records?" The editors outlined and addressed objections to the Latter-day Saints' activities. First, many Jews were "uncomfortable" with a "Christian organization" collecting "names and vital records about Jewish individuals." Along similar lines, many Jews questioned whether their cooperation with the Mormon project may have negative consequences in the future; the historical experience of the Jewish people might lead one to conclude that permission to microfilm records today might result in genocide tomorrow. Second, many objected to using the Mormon records collection because the information was used in temple ordinances, such as proxy baptism. And finally, cooperation with the Mormon project brought a proselytizing people into contact with Jews. Kurzweil and Siegel noted that "no clear distinction" could be made "as far as who raises the objections"; for example, "We know Orthodox Jews who have used the Mormon library without hesitation, and non-religious Jews who object to Jewish-Mormon cooperation."

The editors of *Toledot* took the position that it was in the best interest of Jewish genealogists to cooperate with the Mormons. The Mormon genealogy library, noted Kurzweil and Siegel, provided access to Jewish materials free of charge which might not otherwise be accessed. On the issue of proxy baptism, Kurzweil and Siegel held that it should not be a concern since the ritual has no validity for Jews.<sup>137</sup> On the final concern,

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<sup>137</sup> The fear that Latter-day Saints would baptize Jews was realized in the early 1990s. Gary Mokotoff and others discovered while doing researching in the Mormon Family History Library that Jewish names were among those listed in the International Genealogical Index, the Church's

increased contact with missionaries, the editors suggested vigilance. Kurweil and Siegal wrote, “we see Jewish genealogy as a way to increase our sense of Jewish identification,” and until such time as Jewish archival institutions create a comparable archive of material as the Latter-day Saints, it is in the interest of Jews to use their resources. “In our view,” wrote the editors, “the Mormon collection of Jewish genealogical material can *help* our effort towards increased Jewish identification.”<sup>138</sup> As was the case with the student’s question regarding the Nazi use of genealogy, Kurweil and others argued that the actions of the Latter-day Saints should not prevent Jews from using their resources as a means of discovering their ancestry and their place in the Jewish historical experience.

Despite the dangers – from the potential threat of another Holocaust to the possible proxy baptism of a Jewish loved one – an imperative exists in Jewish religious tradition to honor and perpetuate the memory of one’s ancestors. “Judaism is not just a matter of individual commitment,” remarked Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. “However personal one’s involvement may be,” he wrote, “Judaism always entails a linkup with past and future generations.” Genealogy and family history broadens the commandment to “honor thy father and mother” to earlier generations and ultimately to the “source of all human life.”<sup>139</sup> Any ancestor – famous or not – located in time and place becomes an “anchor

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listing of those who received temple ordinances. Mokotoff brought the issue to the attention of J. Richard Clarke at the Church’s Family History Department, who promised the removal of Jewish names from the Church’s Index in July 1993. However, the Church failed to respond until May 1995, when the Church reached an agreement with representatives from the Jewish community. See Gary Mokotoff, “The Mormon / Jewish Controversy: What Really Happened,” *Avotaynu* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 3-6, 43-44. A 2004 *New York Times* article indicates that the proxy baptism of Jewish Holocaust victims has continued to some extent. See “Mormons Said to Flout Vow Not to Baptize Deceased Jews,” *New York Times*, 10 April 2004.

<sup>138</sup> Arthur Kurzweil and Steven Siegal, “To Our Readers,” *Toledot* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1977-1978): 2, 21-22.

<sup>139</sup> Adin Steinsaltz, *Teshuvah: A Guide for the Newly Observant Jew* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 59-61.

point and source of commitment,” Steinsaltz wrote.<sup>140</sup> Part of using genealogy and family history as a method of establishing or sustaining Jewish identity – as opposed to American identity – involved reaching back through generations of ancestors who assimilated into American culture and society and set aside Jewish traditions, practices, and ideas. “Strengthening one’s ties with one’s own past is part of renewing one’s connectedness with the sources of Jewish life in general,” Steinsaltz wrote.<sup>141</sup>

Paul Cowan’s memoir *An Orphan in History* illustrates the process of bridging the assimilation experience through family history and religious observance. Cowan wrote that his quest for identity through Judaism was a reaction to the “rootlessness I felt as a child – to the fact that for all the Cowan family’s warmth, for all its intellectual vigor, for all its loyalty toward each other, our pasts had been amputated.”<sup>142</sup> That “amputation” was the outcome of the assimilation experience of Cowan’s parents, Louis *Cohen* of Lithuanian Jewish ancestry and Pauline Spiegel of German Jewish ancestry, an experience which left their child, Paul, with a fragmented identity, at once Jewish and American but without synthesis or grounding in Jewish religious observance. As a journalist, Cowan encountered the “rooted culture” of the Jewish community in the Lower East Side of New York, which led to a renewed interest in his family’s Jewish heritage. Cowan, with his wife Rachel, joined a *havurah* group in 1974, and he met Rabbi Joseph Singer, who would facilitate Cowan’s *teshuvah*, his “return” to the Jewish faith, in 1976. After his parents’ death in a fire in 1976, Cowan contacted Cohen relatives, including his uncle Saul Cohen, who gave Paul one of his grandfather’s head

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<sup>140</sup> Adin Steinsaltz, *Teshuvah*, 60-61.

<sup>141</sup> Adin Steinsaltz, *Teshuvah*, 61.

<sup>142</sup> Paul Cowan, *An Orphan in History*, 5.

and arm tefillin used by observant Jews during morning prayer. All of these elements in Cowan's experience of return – reconnecting with relatives, joining the *havurah* group, becoming religiously active – rebuilt the continuity between himself and the Jewish people severed by his parents' assimilation into mainstream American culture and society. “For what was our story – the Cohens’, the Spiegels’, even Rachel’s and mine – except the relentless saga of children, born in America, who had renounced their parents’ faith.”<sup>143</sup> In returning to Judaism, in watching his daughter Lisa profess her Jewish faith at her bat mitzvah, Cowan recognized himself whole; “I could live the ethical life” my parents had “always preached in America, our land, precisely because I had seen the shoots that were planted in the past, because I had discovered my Jewish self.”<sup>144</sup>

A growing awareness of the Holocaust and situating it as a pivotal moment in the Jewish historical experience made the goal of locating the facts concerning the fates of victims and survivors, marking their presence in time and place, a significant motivation for undertaking genealogy research. Jane Saladof observed a double motivation for conducting genealogical research when it came to the Holocaust: to honor the dead and “to comprehend the collective ordeal in personal terms.”<sup>145</sup> Putting the Holocaust in personal terms makes it “more than one more chapter in Jewish history,” wrote Kurzweil. As a “people of memory,” it is imperative that Jews “make a personal connection with the Holocaust” through finding the victims’ names, who their families were, where and how they died, to determine, “What is their relationship to me?”<sup>146</sup> Locating ancestors in

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<sup>143</sup> Paul Cowan, *An Orphan in History*, 238.

<sup>144</sup> Paul Cowan, *An Orphan in History*, 250.

<sup>145</sup> Jane Saladof, “Some Call It Roots, by Us It’s Yichus,” *Moment* 3 (October 1977): 45.

<sup>146</sup> Arthur Kurzweil, *From Generation to Generation*, 130-131.

this defining event in the historical experience of the Jewish people links oneself to the Holocaust in an intimate way.

The Dicker family genealogy, profiled by Saladof in the October 1977 issue of *Moment*, provides a late 1970s example of Jewish American ancestral knowledge production fulfilling the call to remember. Herman Dicker was a librarian at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York City. Dicker's foray into genealogy started in 1975 at the annual family Passover Seder. "While talking about our chain of tradition and family heritage," Dicker's brother Albert said to those gathered, "If I don't even know where I come from, what can I transmit to my children?" Soon after the Seder, Dicker heard Rabbi Albert Thaler speak of the necessity for delving into one's family history for the purpose of passing that knowledge "on to future generations." The research was a collaborative effort among Dicker family members around the world. The result, Dicker hoped, would "shed some light about our forefathers," provide a "clearer picture about our origins," and "cement loosened family ties and transmit previous family traditions."<sup>147</sup> The story of the Dicker ancestors and the act of remembering is represented in multiple forms in the volume: lineages, biographical accounts of everyday family life, including experiences of persecution and flight, photographs and maps, and an honor roll of Holocaust victims. These objective manifestations of continuity between ancestors and descendants conjures up a world-wide network of family which individual members of the family are obligated to sustain through the transmission of ancestral knowledge to future generations.

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<sup>147</sup> Herman Dicker, *A Jewish Family Trail: The Dickers & Their Mates* (New York: Express Printing Company, 1977), 1-2.

### **Genealogy, Family History, and Jewish Peoplehood**

Stern, Rottenberg, Kurzweil and others involved in the emergence of organized Jewish American genealogy argued that genealogy and family history promoted and sustained Jewish identity. The lived experiences of your ancestors, they suggested, are steps in a factual line of action that resulted in your existence. Genealogy and family history represents, it makes visible, the continuity between previous generations and their living descendants. Genealogy and family history, Rottenberg argued, brings about the recognition that each person is a “link in a chain.” On a micro-level, genealogical research produces knowledge of social bonds among progenitors and offspring and an awareness of historical and cultural diversity among Jews; but Jewish American genealogy discourse of the 1970s and `80s also treated the practice as method of suturing individual Jews into the collective historical experience of the Jewish people in general. The discourse suggests that the suturing process between individual Jews and the Jewish people is accomplished by extending the language of family and lineage – and thereby familial bonds and responsibilities – to the Jewish people as a whole. Kurzweil turned to the biblical genealogies to explain the mechanics of this process.

One function of the biblical genealogies is to bring the individual Jew into association with the Jewish people. The biblical genealogies “offer a perspective oriented toward family lines,” Kurzweil wrote, with each generation bringing the story of the Jewish people closer to the present.<sup>148</sup> The “genealogical approach” of story-telling in scriptures makes it more difficult for a Jewish reader to disassociate himself or herself from the events described because each generation’s experiences is joined to the previous

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<sup>148</sup> Arthur Kurzweil, *From Generation to Generation*, 64.

generation and the subsequent generation as part of a larger family tree, “linking everyone together to a family of humankind.” The biblical genealogies say to the Jewish reader: “This is your family.” Kurzweil noted that while the biblical genealogies could be interpreted to mean that all human beings are part of a family united in a common origin in the Garden of Eden, the biblical genealogies represent a record of the family history of the Jewish people in particular. The biblical genealogies, argued Kurzweil, are indicative of Jewish lineage and therefore continuity. “When we make reference to Abraham as, ‘Our Father, Abraham,’ we are not simply speaking in metaphor. Abraham and Sarah are at the top of the genealogy of the Jews” Kurzweil wrote.<sup>149</sup> In *Finding Our Fathers*, Rottenberg also suggests the literal-ness of membership in the Jewish people, arguing that because of the limited number of Jews in the world, “it is not an impossible dream” to link up “your family history” with those of other Jews.<sup>150</sup>

Defining Jewish peoplehood in terms of family poses both challenges and benefits. On the one hand, Kurzweil noted, “viewing the Jewish people as a family” means “also excluding the rest of the world,” that instead of “building bridges between groups, walls could be built.” But on the other hand, said Kurzweil, “When we see ourselves and our people as a family, how much more powerful a conception that is than to view our community as a random group of individuals.”<sup>151</sup> It is more powerful, in Kurzweil’s estimation, because if you are a member of a family, you are responsible for and have obligations to other family members. “Since we are not just for ourselves, but

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<sup>149</sup> Arthur Kurzweil, *From Generation to Generation*, 65; Rottenberg made the idea of shared descent from Abraham and Sarah explicit in *Finding Our Fathers*, noting the probability that most present-day Jews are descended from medieval rabbis who kept careful records of their families and offering readers pedigree charts of biblical generations, Jewish kings, and medieval rabbis.

<sup>150</sup> Dan Rottenberg, *Finding Our Fathers*, 6.

<sup>151</sup> Arthur Kurzweil, *From Generation to Generation*, 65-66.

rather are part of a group, we must be more responsible for our actions,” wrote Kurzweil. “Responsibility for one’s actions is a cornerstone of Jewish belief.”<sup>152</sup> The social bond between family members is established through the care of others, including children and parents, material and emotional sustenance, and recognition of interdependence – in other words, through commitment to others. It goes unsaid by Kurzweil, but conceptualizing peoplehood in terms of family rather than community also implies that peoplehood is permanent. Genealogy and family history, Kurzweil argued, provides one method of restoring and sustaining the bond between living and deceased family members, making the continuity between one generation and the next clearly visible to living generations. The production of a genealogy or family history fulfilled a responsibility to remember and honor the network of human beings who made possible the continued existence of living, concrete Jews and the perpetuation of Judaism. But what is to be made of the disadvantage noted by Kurzweil: building walls of separation rather than bridges between peoples?

Kurzweil called up a vision of Jewish peoplehood that did not make reference to land but rather to lineage. Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin argue that genealogy and territorialism have “been the problematic and necessary (if not essential) terms around which Jewish identity has revolved.” The two authors support genealogy – “family, history, memory, and practice” – as a means of perpetuating Jewish identity over claims to a geographic space.<sup>153</sup> Diasporic consciousness, according to Boyarin and Boyarin, conceptualizes the “Jewish collective as one of sharing space with others, devoid of

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<sup>152</sup> Arthur Kurzweil, *From Generation to Generation*, 64.

<sup>153</sup> Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Summer 1993): 714.



exclusivist and dominating power” and “without eradicating cultural difference.”<sup>154</sup>

Contrasting the early twentieth century Mormon conception of the relationship between genealogy and peoplehood with the notion suggested by Kurzweil perhaps helps in understanding and evaluating the “tribal” implications of thinking about the Jewish people as a family. The Mormon project of universal salvation draws all people into a single “grand family of man” united through temple ordinances and the Christian gospel.<sup>155</sup> In contrast, the image of Jewish peoplehood conjured up by genealogy and family history ensures the continued existence of the Jewish religious tradition without obliterating difference, without unifying (and homogenizing) all peoples.

### **Discussion**

The discourse produced by leading figures in the modern Jewish American genealogy movement and its commentators situates genealogy and family history as a method for creating and sustaining Jewish identity. Genealogy and family history make visible a continuous line of action, from ancestors to descendents, testifying to the survival of Judaism and conferring upon descendents a responsibility to perpetuate and honor the memory of one’s ancestors. Genealogy itself honors and perpetuates the

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<sup>154</sup> Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, “Diaspora,” 713.

<sup>155</sup> Boyarin and Boyarin contrast the particularity of Judaism with the universalizing tendency in Christianity, e.g. being “reborn” through baptism obliterates material, bodily differences, replacing them with spiritual sameness; baptism, Boyarin and Boyarin note, “consists of a new birth that is understood as substituting an allegorical genealogy for a literal one.” Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, “Diaspora,” 695. Donald Harman Akenson’s research addresses some of the universalizing elements of the Mormon genealogy project. He criticizes the Mormon project of universal salvation for forcing culturally specific forms of lineage organization – what he calls “grammars of genealogical ascent” – into the “standard double” genealogy model representative of hetero-normative kinship; the goal of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints entails “plugging” all human beings – regardless of cultural difference – into a single genealogical narrative based on their reading of salvation history. Donald Harman Akenson, *Some Family: The Mormons and How Humanity Keeps Track of Itself* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007).

memory of Jewish ancestors, making visible both a Jewish family in time and place and the larger “imagined community” of the Jewish people. While families and a people do not exist without the individuals who compose them, these entities live on long past the existence of its individual members; genealogy and family history ensure their continued existence. Jewish identity is sustained by recognition of a social bond based on shared obligations to one’s family – and by extension to the Jewish people; genealogy and family history make those bonds visible.

Like African American genealogy, Jewish American genealogy is shaped in part by specific historical circumstances of rupture and erasure in the continuity between ancestors and descendants. In the Jewish case, assimilation into dominant American culture often entailed sacrificing Jewish cultural traditions, including language, dress, and religious faith. The Holocaust represented an even more severe instance of rupture in the continuity; the genocide of European Jewry reverberated far beyond national borders and individual families to threaten the existence of Judaism itself. According to the discourse produced by leaders in the Jewish American genealogy movement, genealogy and family history could bridge the rupture, restoring continuity between ancestors and descendants and between families and the collective historical Jewish experience.

Genealogy and family history also grafts the individual of Jewish descent onto the larger historical experience of the Jewish people. According to Kurzweil, Rottenberg, and others, an individual family history was a unique expression of a collective historical experience. On the one hand, the discourse recognizes that a fundamental lesson of biblical genealogies is that all human beings share a common origin. The “Judeo-Christian tradition,” wrote Rottenberg, “teaches that everyone, no matter what his culture

or religion, no matter if he be a king or beggar, is descended from one root,” that of Adam and Eve.<sup>156</sup> But Jewish genealogy is also group-specific, and its particularity introduces an element of exclusion. The language of family, of lineage, and of social bonds symbolized by shared “blood” is extended to the Jewish people as a whole. By doing so, the individual Jew is sutured into a larger community of responsibility, with debts and responsibilities to all Jews, suggesting the kind of social bond that exists between parents and offspring, constituted by mutual obligations to sustain one another.

## 2.4 Genetic Genealogy Discourse

### Introduction

“We are all Africans,” commented Henry Louis Gates Jr. in a 2007 *Ebony* article. Population geneticists trace the origins of all humanity to the region around Ethiopia around 150,000 years ago – a fact, Gates noted, that would have been news to rabid segregationists such as “Bull” Connor and Orval Faubus, as it most certainly would have been news to the Daughters of the American Revolution, Mormon, and eugenicist genealogists encountered earlier in this monograph. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, research by medical and population geneticists is being applied in genealogy and family history. Gates in particular has popularized the use of genetic genealogy as a powerful tool in African American family history research. The American system of slavery, argued Gates, was a “carefully conceived effort to rob our people” – Americans of African descent – “of all family ties and the most basic sense of self-knowledge,” breaking family bonds, obliterating African identities, and obscuring

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<sup>156</sup> Dan Rottenberg, *Finding Our Fathers*, 8.

origins. Moving forward as a people, wrote Gates, requires getting “grounded,” a process that starts by “grounding ourselves in our own family’s extended past.”<sup>157</sup>

Gates, through his *African American Lives* series on PBS and numerous books and articles, argues that genetic genealogy makes it possible for African Americans to get past the pain of slavery and the Middle Passage to discover their African “roots,” to embrace the “African” in their self-identification as African American. But Gates’ interest in the possibilities of genetic testing to bridge gaps in a family history is one instance of a broader public fascination surrounding genetic genealogy both in the United States and abroad. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, genetic technologies – combined with increased access to traditional genealogical resources through the Internet – are creating, as one commentator suggests, a new “new genealogy.”<sup>158</sup> Commercial DNA testing companies, such as Gates’ own AfricanDNA.com, purport to offer their clients evidence of their ancient origins and information regarding people around the world with who they share common ancestors. As evidenced by the discourse surrounding the use of genetic genealogy in the United States, the practice of DNA testing for the purposes of family history research has complicated implications for identity, on one hand potentially shifting the focus back to bio-racial definitions of self and others but on the other hand providing additional evidence of the social bond called up by the genealogical assumption when the “paper trail” runs out.

The discourse produced by popular commentators on genetic genealogy treat the practice as a method, if not an unproblematic one, for gaining insight into “who you are,”

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<sup>157</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “We Are All Africans: Genealogical research and DNA testing can reveal your ethnic connections to Africa,” *Ebony*, December 2007, 132-136.

<sup>158</sup> Ronald Roach, “The New Genealogy,” *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* 25 (21 February 2008): 17.

in this case, your identity. “The popular embrace of DNA genealogy speaks to the rising power of genetics to shape our sense of self,” wrote Amy Harmon in a January 2006 *New York Times* article. “By conjuring up a biologically based history, the tests forge a visceral connection to our ancestors that seems to allow us to transcend our own lives.”<sup>159</sup> Much of the discourse on genetic genealogy in popular media is built on the cultural belief in DNA’s objectivity as a “natural fact” requiring no additional interpretation or commentary. Dorothy Nelkin and M. Susan Lindee note that in American popular culture, “DNA is relatively independent of the body, gives the body life and power, and is the point at which true identity (and self) can be determined.”<sup>160</sup> Gates, however, provides an example of a nuanced use of genetic genealogy to flesh out a family history and construct individual identity, calling upon traditional genealogy research tools and historical analysis in addition to the findings of DNA testing. Underlying Gates’ use of genetic genealogy is the belief that shared genetic markers are objective evidence of a social bond constitutive of identity. Therefore his project provides a case for considering the implications of genetic genealogy for the operation of the genealogical assumption.

**Population genetics forms the backbone of genetic genealogy.**

It is helpful to begin by briefly explaining some key definitions and the “high-school biology” fundamentals behind genetic genealogy. DNA – an acronym for deoxyribonucleic acid – is often called the “blueprint of life” because it contains the genetic coding by which individual cells diversify and reproduce to create distinct, unique living organisms; it is the instruction manual for cell reproduction and the

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<sup>159</sup> Amy Harmon, “Love You, K2a2a, Whoever You Are,” *New York Times*, 22 January 2006.

<sup>160</sup> Dorothy Nelkin and M. Susan Lindee, *The DNA Mystique: The Gene as a Cultural Icon* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2004), 40.

diversification of their function. Sections of DNA which carry genetic coding specific to a function are called genes. DNA is composed of four nucleotides: adenine, which is always paired to thymine, and guanine, which is always paired to cytosine. The unique combinations of these nucleotides account for difference among living things. In human beings, DNA is found both within a cell's nucleus, i.e. its "brain," and a cell's mitochondria, i.e. its "power-house." Nuclear DNA is located in twenty-three pairs of chromosomes, one half of each pair contributed by each parent. Twenty-two of these pairs, called autosomal chromosomes, are considered recombinant, meaning that one unit of the pair combines with the other, making the contributions of each parent indistinguishable from one another. The twenty-third pair determines the sex of the child. If the child receives an X-chromosome from its father, the child will be female, and the X-chromosome will recombine with the other X-chromosome contributed by the mother. However, if the child receives a Y-chromosome from its father, the child will be male, and the Y-chromosome will *not* recombine with the mother's X-chromosome; in other words, the DNA in the Y-chromosome is non-recombinant – it is transferred from father to male child unchanged. The DNA found in mitochondria is also non-recombinant, passing unchanged from mother to male and female children.<sup>161</sup>

Genetic genealogy is made possible by research into human genetics for the purposes of studying genetic diseases, human origins, and ancient population migrations. The Human Genome Project (HGP) remains the most significant of genetic research projects. Initiated in 1990 as a joint effort of the United States Department of Energy and

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<sup>161</sup> There are a number of descriptions of the biological fundamentals behind genetic genealogy. The best summary, in my opinion, is Josephine Johnston and Mark Thomas, "Summary: The Science of Genealogy by Genetics," *Developing World Bioethics* 3, no. 2 (2003): 103-108.

the National Institute of Health, the HGP sought to map out the chemical base pairs that form human DNA and to identify all human genes, or functional segments of DNA. (Genome refers to the entirety of a living organism's DNA.) Through the study of the human genetic code, researchers hoped to discover what made human beings distinct from other creatures on earth and create a "general reference with which to compare individual DNA."<sup>162</sup> In 1998, a private corporation, Celera Genomics, launched its own independent project using a faster and less expensive method of analysis. Celera Genomics and the Human Genome Project announced in April 2003 that 99% of the human genome had been sequenced to an accuracy of 99.9%. The major finding of the HGP was that human beings are genetically 99% the same, i.e. two unrelated human beings share 99% of their DNA.<sup>163</sup> Human variation occurs in the other 1%, and population genetics and genetic anthropology concern themselves with that 1%.

In genetic analysis, individual life histories and cultural traditions are stripped away and human beings are reduced to their DNA, a collection of adenine, thymine, guanine, and cytosine which is then comparable. Christine Hauskeller remarks that "species identity and personal uniqueness" are reified through "reference to the human genome," but a third "notion of identity" appears in genetic discourse as well: "intra-species classifications according to genetic characteristics."<sup>164</sup> Such classification is based on mutations in human DNA. Both nuclear DNA and mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) are naturally subject to mutation over time, which accounts for genetic

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<sup>162</sup> Robert Carter, "Genes, genomes, and genealogies: The return of scientific racism?," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 4 (July 2007): 553.

<sup>163</sup> The National Institute of Health described the amount of shared human DNA as 99.9% and human variation at .01% but numbers were not consistent across the literature read for this inquiry.

<sup>164</sup> Christine Hauskeller, "Genes, genomes and identity. Projections on matter," *New Genetics and Society* 23, no. 3 (December 2004): 291, 295.

variation in human beings. A mutation can be as simple as a change in a single set of nucleotides. Rare mutations are generally considered individual instances of genetic change. Single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs), however, are particular types of genetic mutations, ones which occur in at least 1% of the population. Groups of SNPs – sets of identified genetic mutations – that travel across multiple generations are called haplotypes. Groups of related haplotypes are designated as haplo-groups. A unified system of both Y-chromosome and mtDNA haplo-groups emerged early in the 2000s and continued research has led major haplo-groups to be subdivided.<sup>165</sup> Haplo-groups “are neither fixed nor unique to a particular population” but do “arise predominantly within one geographic area.”<sup>166</sup>

Population geneticists and genetic anthropologists seek to understand the development of human variation and ancient migrations by examining the DNA of various populations, and their research forms the larger historical and geographic map upon which a single human being’s genetic makeup is located through comparison. The Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP) – not affiliated with the Human Genome Project – was started in 1993 by the Morrison Institute of Stanford University and was the first major research project seeking to clarify and map out genetic differences between human beings. HGDP researchers collected genetic material from those groups of human beings considered by researchers to be the most isolated and therefore most genetically “pure,” i.e. indigenous peoples. The rhetoric used by Project spokespeople situated indigenous populations as a “window into the past,” as if these peoples were

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<sup>165</sup> Jon Entine, *Abraham’s Children: Race, Identity, and the DNA of the Chosen People* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2007), 355.

<sup>166</sup> Jennifer K. Wagner, “Interpreting the Implications of DNA Ancestry Tests,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 53, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 235.



museum artifacts waiting for study by civilized societies.<sup>167</sup> (The rhetoric hearkens back to late nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropologists who looked to “primitive” peoples to understand human development.) After the HGDP was linked to extracting and then patenting genetic material collected from indigenous populations, the Project faced criticism from academics and indigenous peoples who charged the researchers with “bio-colonialism.” The Project was reorganized in 1999 but then quickly faded away.<sup>168</sup>

More recent genetic diversity projects have also faced criticisms about the social and cultural consequences of their work for the meaning of identity, race, and ethnicity and raised questions about who has the authority to define the rules of group membership. The International HapMap Project, initiated in 2002, is a multi-national public and private research effort to catalogue “common patterns” of human genetic variation and make the “information available in the public domain.”<sup>169</sup> But like the Human Genome Diversity Project, notes Jennifer A. Hamilton, the “HapMap problematically materializes race through the use of categories that easily map onto extant taxonomies of racialized difference.”<sup>170</sup> The more recent Genographic Project, launched by the National Geographic Society in April 2005, also seeks to collect DNA

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<sup>167</sup> Jonathan Marks, “‘We’re Going to Tell These People Who They Really Are’: Science and Relatedness,” in *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies*, eds. Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 369.

<sup>168</sup> According to Marks, the National Institute of Health was awarded a patent on a cell line extracted from a Papua New Guinea population called Hagahai. Criticism of the patent by indigenous peoples and anthropologists extended to the Human Genome Diversity Project, which was also collecting genetic material from indigenous populations. Jennifer A. Hamilton adds that HGDP organizers were criticized for relying on archaic assumptions about race, “primitive peoples,” and the composition of populations. See Jonathan Marks, “‘We’re Going to Tell These People Who They Really Are’: Science and Relatedness,” 372; Jennifer A. Hamilton, “Revitalizing Difference in the HapMap: Race and Contemporary Human Genetic Variation Research,” *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 473.

<sup>169</sup> Jennifer A. Hamilton, “Revitalizing Difference in the HapMap,” 473.

<sup>170</sup> Jennifer A. Hamilton, “Revitalizing Difference in the HapMap,” 475.

samples from indigenous peoples but has sought to avoid charges of “bio-colonialism” that haunted the HGDP. In addition to gathering data from indigenous populations, the Genographic Project solicits individual submissions of genetic material, which is then analyzed by Family Tree DNA, a leading commercial DNA testing company.<sup>171</sup> Reporter Amy Harmon notes that by accepting individual submissions, the Genographic Project expands the set of stakeholders in the research beyond the researchers themselves and the indigenous populations from whom DNA samples are extracted.<sup>172</sup> Sounding similar to HGDP organizers, Spencer Wells, Genographic Project director, says the goal of the Project is to create a “virtual museum of human history” through the collection of genetic data.<sup>173</sup>

Scholars in a number of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, and bioethics, have been vocal critics of the racist assumptions behind much genetic diversity research and drawn attention to possible unintended consequences of that research for personal and social identity.<sup>174</sup> Among the unintended consequences is the re-essentialization of race, which following World War II was de-naturalized and recognized as a social rather than a biological category. Franz Boas played a key role in

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<sup>171</sup> The Genographic Project website offers another play on the genealogical assumption in its effort to encourage people to submit their DNA for the Project. The homepage reads, “Where do you **really** come from? And how did you get to where you live today?” The answer, suggests the Genographic Project, lies in your DNA. See the Genographic Project website, <<https://genographic.nationalgeographic.com/genographic/index.html>> (accessed June 2010).

<sup>172</sup> Amy Harmon, “DNA Gatherers Hit a Snag: The Tribes Don’t Trust Them,” *New York Times*, 10 December 2006, 1.

<sup>173</sup> Claudia Kalb, “In Our Blood; DNA Testing” *Newsweek*, 6 February 2006.

<sup>174</sup> See for example, Robert Carter, “Genes, genomes, and genealogies: The return of scientific racism?,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 4 (July 2007): 546-556; Troy Duster, “Race and Reification in Science,” *Science*, 18 February 2005, 1050-1051; Jonathan Marks, “‘We’re Going to Tell These People Who They Really Are’: Science and Relatedness,” in *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies*, eds. Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 355-383; Osagie K. Obasogie, “Return of the race myth?,” *New Scientist*, July 2009, 22-23.

the early part of the twentieth century in breaking the links between “culture” and “biology” that characterized Lamarckian anthropology. Mainstream sociologists and anthropologists have argued for over half a century that race is not a biological category but rather a social one whose definition and consequences change over time and culture. It is therefore no surprise that contemporary sociologists and anthropologists have expressed concern over the popularity of genetic testing, both for the purpose of constructing a narrative of human origins and for determining individual ancestry.

While those associated with genetic diversity projects espouse that human beings share 99% of their genetic makeup, the projects themselves are informed by the assumption that human differences are visible, quantifiable, and capable of classification through DNA. A history of human migration and mixing, however, calls the notion of “pure” racial groups into question. Rose M. Brewer warns that “new biological categories may be linked to ancestral descent populations and existing socially constructed categories of race and ethnicity,” a process carried out in haplotype mapping.<sup>175</sup> The language employed by the Human Genome Diversity Project, the HapMap, and the Genographic Project appear to reify the concept of race. For example, the HGDP produced color-coded maps of ethnic group regions, thereby suggesting distinct categories of human beings genetically defined.<sup>176</sup>

The potential of genetic technologies and research to reify racial categories extends well beyond genetic and anthropological discourse. Genetic data is being used by pharmaceutical companies to develop medications geared toward particular racial and

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<sup>175</sup> Rose M. Brewer, “Thinking Critically about Race and Genetics,” *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 34, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 515.

<sup>176</sup> Jonathan Marks, “‘We’re Going to Tell These People Who They Really Are’: Science and Relatedness,” 371.

ethnic groups. Bidil, for example, is specifically marketed as a prescription drug for use by those of African descent who experience hypertension and other forms of heart disease; but, notes Troy Duster, only 6% of heart failure deaths fall within the target age group for the drug, 45 to 64, and the “highly variable phenotype of skin color” among African Americans complicates the correlation between race and disease suggested by the drug manufacturer.<sup>177</sup> Osagie K. Obasogie adds that the approval of Bidil allowed the drug’s “supporters to make claims about the regulatory, legal and economic relevance of race and genetics.”<sup>178</sup> Robert Carter notes that the implications of genetic diversity projects are ambiguous because certain inequalities and disparities in health and disease do seem to correlate with populations defined, however hazily, in terms of race or ethnicity,” e.g. a “higher prevalence of prostate cancer, obesity and high blood pressure” among African Americans and increased presence of BRCA-1, a gene linked to breast cancer, in “Ashkenazi Jewish women of Eastern European origin.”<sup>179</sup> Another site where genetic material potentially reinforces essentialized versions of race is criminal DNA databases. The same genetic technology used to determine probable ancestry is “being offered to police stations around the country to ‘predict’ or ‘estimate’ whether the DNA left at a crime scene belongs to a white or black person,” writes Duster.<sup>180</sup>

It is further argued by these scholars that those in the humanities and social sciences should play a role in making the public aware of the consequences of genetic technologies for understanding the nature of human diversity. Paul Brodwin, an investigator on the National Genome Research Institute’s Ethical, Legal and Social

<sup>177</sup> Troy Duster, “Race and Reification in Science,” *Science*, 18 February 2005, 1050.

<sup>178</sup> Osagie K. Obasogie, “Return of the race myth?,” *New Scientist*, 4 July 2009, 22-23.

<sup>179</sup> Robert Carter, “Genes, genomes and genealogies: The return of scientific racism?,” 547-548.

<sup>180</sup> Troy Duster, “Deep Roots and Tangled Branches,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 22 (2006): B14.

Implications Program, writes that the “scholarly (and left-liberal) opposition to ‘genetic essentialism’ is not really a reaction to contemporary genetics, but rather” to “popular reconstructions of genetic science.” And it is in the arena of “popular reception” that “anti-essentialist interventions” can be directed.<sup>181</sup> Kimberly TallBear, writing in reference to the Genographic Project, calls upon indigenous populations to challenge the authority of genetic scientists to define the story of their origins. The narrative that “we are all related” is “totalizing,” writes TallBear. Indigenous peoples’ DNA is submitted to cataloguing for determining their “authentic” origins, leaving little room for culturally specific narratives of creation. The “fight for indigenous peoples – and for communities more broadly who are regularly subject to the scientific gaze – is to debate *which* meanings and *whose* meanings inform law and policy,” writes TallBear; “That is where we should be working.”<sup>182</sup> Jennifer Wagner, noting that most position papers and press releases associated with genetic research and technologies are “generally drafted” by persons “well-versed in only one discipline,” argues that much communication among stakeholders in genetic research gets “lost in translation” at the disciplinary “crossroads.” A “multidisciplinary approach” could better elucidate the “ethical, legal and social implications” of genetic technologies.<sup>183</sup>

Genetic genealogy draws upon the findings of the Human Genome Project and research on human genetic diversity as well as the methods of criminal forensics to

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<sup>181</sup> Paul Brodwin, “Genetics, Identity, and the Anthropology of Essentialism,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 328.

<sup>182</sup> Kim TallBear, “Narratives of Race and Indigeneity in the Genographic Project,” *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 422-423.

<sup>183</sup> Jennifer K. Wagner, “Interpreting the Implications of DNA Ancestry Tests,” 232, 246. Rose Brewer also calls for an interdisciplinary / multidisciplinary approach to questions circulating around genetic technologies and research, writing that “hard” and “soft” sciences should be in communication with each other. Rose M. Brewer, “Thinking Critically about Race and Genetics,” 518.

interpret individual genetic makeup. Over the 2000s, a number of companies were founded to take advantage of the genealogy market. Family Tree DNA, founded by Bennett Greenspan in April 2000, was the first commercial genetic genealogy company. Family Tree DNA is associated with Genomic Analysis and Technology Core Laboratories at the University of Arizona and is currently involved in analyzing data collected in the National Geographic Society Genographic Project. Relative Genetics, founded in 2001, is owned by Sorenson Genomics of Salt Lake City, Utah. African Ancestry, established by University of Chicago biologist Rick Kittles in 2003, specializes in African DNA. African Ancestry works in collaboration with Sorenson Genomics.<sup>184</sup> The non-invasive extraction method and decreasing costs of sequencing genetic material have contributed to the increased interest in genetic genealogy and the flourishing of commercial genetic genealogy companies.

The tests offered by commercial genetic genealogy companies rely on the unique characteristics of human DNA. What do DNA tests reveal in regards to ancestry? The majority of these companies provide lineage-based tests from Y-chromosomal and mtDNA. Y-chromosome DNA found in the nucleus of a male human being's cells, it should be recalled, is non-recombinant, meaning it is passed down unchanged from fathers to sons; therefore Y-chromosome testing provides a method of identifying shared male paternal ancestors. Since surnames also generally pass from father to son, the Y-chromosome DNA markers of two men sharing the same surname can be compared, and genetic analysis can reveal if and when the two may have shared a common ancestor. Y-chromosome analysis can also bring a "non-paternity event" to light, indicating that the

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<sup>184</sup> I should also mention the leading genetic genealogy company in Great Britain, Oxford Ancestors, founded by Bryan Sykes, an Oxford University geneticist.

presumed father of a child is not the actual biological father and potentially rupturing an assumed genealogical bond. Mitochondrial DNA is passed unchanged from mothers to male and female children, thus offering a way of tracing maternal lineage. However, because mtDNA mutates at a slower rate than Y-chromosomal DNA, it can also be used to trace “deep,” or ancient, female ancestry. A second type of genetic genealogy test involves classifying a consumer’s DNA into a haplo-group created by population geneticists and genetic anthropologists and making claims about ancestral and geographic origins based on the classification. Some companies also provide admixture analysis of the recombinant portion of nuclear DNA, i.e. the autosomes, examining the frequency of genetic markers for African, East Asian, American Indian, and European population groups; the results point to a rough percentage of each group’s contribution to individual “racial” genetic makeup.

When a consumer purchases a DNA test from a genetic genealogy company, the consumer receives a kit including a number of swabs, which are run over the interior of the cheek. The cheek swab is deposited in a tube and returned to the testing company. The material is sent to a laboratory for sequencing and analysis. There are two primary kinds of DNA markers used in genetic genealogy: SNPs, described above, and Short Tandem Repeats (STR), which mutate at a faster rate than SNPs. Short Tandem Repeats refer to segments of genetic material which repeat a number of times in sequence; STRs tend to mutate faster than other types of mutations. An allele value refers to the number of times a STR repeats. In the case of Y-chromosome analysis, an allele value is assigned to a DYS number. DYS, which stands for DNA Y-chromosome Segment, refers to the identification number for a segment of the Y-chromosome assigned by the Human

Genome Nomenclature Committee.<sup>185</sup> The sequenced DNA is compared with other samples in project databases. For example, the Sorenson Molecular Genealogy Foundation, founded by Mormon philanthropist John Sorenson, hosts a database; Family Tree DNA and African Ancestry each have their own databases.<sup>186</sup>

Genetic genealogy tests have some significant limitations. For example, current DNA testing can only address two lines of ancestry, paternal lineage through Y-chromosome DNA and maternal lineage through mtDNA. In other words, DNA testing can only provide information regarding two of your eight great-grandparents, two of your sixteen great-great-grandparents, etc. Duster remarks that it is a commonplace to say “we can choose our friends, but that our families are given,” but lineage-based testing throws this accepted wisdom on its head; we have sixty-four great-great-great-grandparents but DNA testing only allows access to two of them, and what could be more “arbitrary” than just focusing on two of the sixty-four?<sup>187</sup> The other sixty-two ancestors also contributed to a descendent’s genetic makeup. Another limitation to consider is that finding possible genetic matches with another person depends entirely upon the quality and quantity of the database used, i.e. a smaller database will turn up fewer (or no) matches while a larger database might. Finally, the results of a genetic test for ancestry can be difficult to interpret. The value of a genetic test for ancestry depends upon markers of difference; it is because of differences in genetic makeup that markers can be

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<sup>185</sup> Colleen Fitzpatrick and Andrew Yeiser, *DNA & Genealogy* (Fontana Valley, CA: Rice Book Press, 2005), 27-28.

<sup>186</sup> Linda Stern, “Are We All Related?,” *Newsweek*, 26 September 2005, 38. The Sorenson Molecular Genealogy Foundation solicits both genealogy records, e.g. pedigree charts, and DNA samples; Sorenson is also a Mormon, and one could speculate – and Stern does – about connections to the larger Mormon genealogy enterprise of universal salvation and the Foundation’s desire to organize all humanity through genealogy and DNA.

<sup>187</sup> Troy Duster, “Deep Roots and Tangled Branches,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 22 (2006): B13-B14.



compared and interpreted. While projects such as the Human Genome Diversity Project, the HapMap, and the Genographic Project suggest that there are distinct groups of human beings, the reality is less clear. Physical anthropologists, population geneticists, and others argue that all human origins can be found in geographic Africa and the complicated history of human migrations and mixing muddy the waters, making it difficult to make a precise identification of distant ethnic affiliation.

### **Some Issues Raised in Genetic Genealogy Discourse Concerning Identity**

The discourse on genetic genealogy in both popular and scholarly venues throws a spotlight on the ambiguous consequences that result when a person's genealogical quest intersects with the ever-growing and changing science of human genetic diversity and highlights the possible implications for identity formation through genealogy and family history, particularly its impact on the perceived basis of the social bond constitutive of "who you are." In the context of the genealogical assumption, DNA is considered significant because it provides evidence of shared biological material; it is only significant for determining ancestry when matched with another living person or group of people. The assumed self-evidentiary nature of the social bond symbolized by a genetic match, however, potentially exposes the constructed nature of identity, particularly when genetic evidence challenges previously held family or cultural traditions about personal or social identity or when DNA conjures up a previously unknown social bond.

Genetic genealogy as a method of family history research is only a decade old, and popular and scholarly commentators are still struggling to make sense of its implications. A number of articles in the popular press call attention to the ways genetic testing results are conceptualized as hard, objective evidence of one's essential

characteristics. Several articles in the popular press appear to endorse the message: “DNA doesn’t lie.”<sup>188</sup> But a number of journalists and academic writers have resisted and continue to wrestle with tendencies to interpret genetic genealogy’s findings in essentialist ways. Author Edward Ball, for example, questioned the use of genetic evidence to solve mysteries surrounding ancestry, criticizing the “culture of exaggeration” in the field of genetic genealogy and the language of “genetic determinism” that “sweeps aside behavioral explanation and substitutes molecular causes for human messiness.”<sup>189</sup> Journalist Amy Harmon expressed concern over the “authority” a DNA link can give to a genealogical claim defining identity; “will genetic identity undermine our cultural identity?”<sup>190</sup> In another article she wrote, “Whether the preoccupation with the power of genes to confer distinction” – say through sharing a DNA marker with Genghis Kahn – “is entirely healthy is unclear,” and “whether it is rational is even less so.”<sup>191</sup>

Particularly significant in academic circles was and remains the potential implications of applying genetic evidence to questions regarding racial and ethnic group membership. For example, anthropologist Bob Simpson wrote in 2000, as genetic genealogy was beginning to emerge as a viable tool for determining ancestral origins, that “with the rise of the new genetics comes a new vocabulary for grounding difference and similarity as ‘blood’ is displaced by DNA as the essential marker of shared identity and

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<sup>188</sup> See for examples Steve Olsen, “Who’s Your Daddy?,” *Atlantic*, July / August 2007; Amy Harmon, “Love You, Ka2a, Whoever You Are,” *New York Times*, 22 January 2006; Claudia Kalb, “The Ties that Bind,” *Newsweek*, 1 May 2006.

<sup>189</sup> Edward Ball, *The Genetic Strand: Exploring Family History through DNA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 239-242.

<sup>190</sup> Amy Harmon, “Love You, K2a2a, Whoever You Are,” *New York Times*, 22 January 2006.

<sup>191</sup> Amy Harmon, “Who’s Your Great-Great-Great-Great-Granddaddy?,” *New York Times*, 11 June 2006.

attribute.”<sup>192</sup> Where shared “blood” formally signified the social bond between ancestors and descendents, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, DNA is filling that role. Brodwin wrote that ancestral knowledge illuminates “social connections in the present. Knowledge of ancestry ratifies or even creates a social connection in the present,” and involves a claim to certain rights and obligations. Specifying “what counts as legitimate belonging” – a work which genetic markers are called upon to perform – “will affect how people respect such rights or enforce these obligations.”<sup>193</sup> The question must also be raised about *how much* authority should be given to genetic evidence in determination of group membership. Duster reminds readers, “Testing only takes into account biology, and not affiliation with certain groups by way of language, culture or other customs.”<sup>194</sup>

The use of genetic evidence in the determination of group membership already has concrete consequences for individuals. For example, the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma shares a cultural history with Black Seminoles, black freedmen who allied with the Seminole tribe and intermarried with them. The United States government awarded the Seminole Nation nearly sixty million dollars in 1991 in compensation for land seized in Florida. The tribal government distributed the financial award to “Seminoles who could prove descendancy from blood Seminoles on the original tribal rolls.” In 2000, the tribe voted to amend their enrollment criteria to state that to be counted as a member of the tribe, a person must have “one-eighth Seminole blood.” The vote, argues Kimberly TallBear, “essentially said that the historical relationship (and

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<sup>192</sup> Bob Simpson, “Imagined genetic communities: Ethnicity and essentialism in the twenty-first century,” *Anthropology Today* 16, no. 3 (June 2000): 3.

<sup>193</sup> Paul Brodwin, “Genetics, Identity, and the Anthropology of Essentialism,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 325-326.

<sup>194</sup> Troy Duster in Karen Goldberg Goff, “It’s all in the family; But DNA tests won’t answer every question,” *Washington Post*, 11 March 2009.

there are differing perceptions on the closeness of that relationship) is not sufficient for determining rights to Seminole Nation citizenship.”<sup>195</sup> Black Seminoles could make a claim to the financial award through genetic testing, but the test would only provide information for two lines of a person’s ancestry, and a Seminole blood line might exist on one of the remaining six lines.<sup>196</sup>

Genetic genealogy is also being used to provide evidence of Jewish ancestry. The Jewish example shares with the Native American example the element of conflict between the authority of genetic science and the authority of cultural tradition to define membership in the group. Jon Entine, author of *Abraham’s Children: Race, Identity, and the DNA of the Chosen People*, argues that Jewish identity involves more than religious belief and might be found in shared genetic material. Despite a history of continual expulsion and migration, Jews have tended until roughly the last two generations to maintain close-knit communities and not marry outside the Jewish faith, thereby reducing genetic mixture.<sup>197</sup> “While Jews during the Nazi era faced liquidation by genocide, today they face dissolution by conversion, assimilation, and indifference,” Entine writes. However, the “DNA pruning process has preserved an ethnic core population with a

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<sup>195</sup> Kimberly TallBear, “DNA, Blood, and Racializing the Tribe,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 95.

<sup>196</sup> Troy Duster, “Deep Roots and Tangled Branches,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 22 (2006): B13-B14.

<sup>197</sup> Jon Entine, *Abraham’s Children*, 13, 18. Two June 2010 articles report on research concerning the Jewish genome and the genetic similarity among diverse Jewish populations. Jewish communities in Europe and the Middle East share many of the same genetic markers, and diverse Jewish communities with drastically different historical experiences of migration – such as the Ashkenazim and Sephardim – share more genetic markers with each other than they do with other non-Jewish groups. See Tina Hesman Saey, “Tracing Jewish roots: Genome study helps map Diaspora, highlights how heritages blended,” *Science News*, 3 June 2010, <<http://www.sciencenews.org/view/generic/id/59938>> (accessed June 2010); and Nicholas Wade, “Studies Show Jews’ Genetic Similarity,” *New York Times*, 9 June 2010.

common ancestry that many Jews believe defines Jewishness.”<sup>198</sup> The discovery of the “Cohanin gene” in the mid-1990s – a genetic marker shared by men believed to be descendents of Moses’ brother Aaron – gives added weight to the notion that genetic genealogy could play a role in determining Jewish ancestry. But then genetics is not the sole determining factor of Jewish identity. Entine cites Israel’s Law of Return, which gives anyone with a Jewish grandparent the “rights of a Jew” but not status as an actual Jew, and the Orthodox tradition, which assigns membership into the Jewish people through the maternal “blood” line.<sup>199</sup>

Genetic science has also raised significant challenges to the larger Mormon lineage scheme, and therefore Mormon cultural identity, which is built on the veracity of the *Book of Mormon*. It should be recalled that in the Mormon religious tradition, Native Americans are considered the descendents of the Lamanite people, one faction of the ancient Israeli tribe which the *Book of Mormon* holds migrated to the Americas and destroyed their Nephite brothers. Based on the assumption that Native Americans were descendents of the Lamanites, leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints devoted considerable effort to bringing Native Americans into the Mormon fold. Population geneticists have determined that Native Americans share the highest amount of genetic markers with the East Asian “branch” of humanity and are therefore not descendents of ancient Hebrews.<sup>200</sup> Many Latter-day Saint scientists, Simon G.

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<sup>198</sup> Jon Entine, *Abraham’s Children*, 19-20. A 2007 article by Shelly Tenenbaum and Lynn Davidman, based on ethnographic research, backs up Entine’s assertion about Jews using a bio-racial framework to define the meaning of Jewish identity. See Shelly Tenenbaum and Lynn Davidman, “It’s in My Genes: Biological Discourse and Essentialist Views of Identifying Among Contemporary American Jews,” *Sociological Quarterly* 48 (Summer 2007): 435-450.

<sup>199</sup> Jon Entine, *Abraham’s Children*, 349.

<sup>200</sup> Simon G. Southerton, *Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 88; Thomas W. Murphy, “Lamanite Genesis,

Southerton remarks, “admit, either overtly or subtly,” that “Native Americans are principally of Asian ancestry.” This inconvenient fact has encouraged revised interpretations of Mormon scripture. Some Mormon apologists now suggest it would be nearly impossible to “find evidence for an Israelite presence in the Americas,” arguing, among other things, that the Jaredite and Nephite peoples in the *Book of Mormon* were only a small percentage of the entire population in the Americas and that the events recounted in the Mormon scriptures did not take place over the entire continent.<sup>201</sup>

A number of scholars question the extent to which genetic genealogy will serve to essentialize race and ethnic identity, arguing that DNA testing also potentially complicates these categories of belonging. David C. Mountain and Jeanne Kay Guelke hypothesize that the “current diversity of geographical backgrounds and political ideologies of deep genealogists will problematize the issue of racialized identities.” Mountain and Guelke found that more often than not, genetic genealogy companies base their advertising on an “assumed alienation,” a sense of rootless-ness among potential consumers, rather than a desire for exclusion of others.<sup>202</sup> Likewise, Alondra Nelson, in her ethnographic study of African American genealogists’ use of DNA testing, concludes that “while the geneticization of ‘race’ and ethnicity may be the basic logic of genetic genealogy testing, it is not necessarily its inexorable outcome.” Her interview subjects indicated that DNA is “not always accepted as definitive proof of identity” but often

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Genealogy, and Genetics,” in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, eds. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 53-54.

<sup>201</sup> Simon G. Southerton, *Losing a Lost Tribe*, 186-187.

<sup>202</sup> David C. Mountain and Jeanne Kay Guelke, “Genetics, Genealogy, and Geography,” in *Geography and Genealogy: Locating Personal Pasts*, eds. Dallen J. Timothy and Jeanne Kay Guelke (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 158.

interpreted in tandem with other genealogical data to construct meaningful life narratives.<sup>203</sup>

Another theme which emerges in genetic genealogy discourse is the potential of DNA testing to subvert established identities based on long-standing assumptions and family lore about a social bond. DNA evidence is indicative of an existential connection between persons, which is why it is generally considered objective evidence of a social bond. The first major public story concerning the use of genetic technologies to determine distant ancestry involved Thomas Jefferson in 1998. Descendants of Sally Hemings, a slave owned by Jefferson at Monticello, turned to genetic testing to settle family traditions about Jefferson fathering at least some of Hemings' children. The Woodson family, descended from Hemings' eldest son Thomas Woodson – discussed in the section on 1970s and '80s African American genealogy discourse – was one among several families claiming descent from Jefferson who participated in the genetic testing. But the testing revealed that the Woodson family was not genetically related to Jefferson, calling into question a long standing family tradition and causing confusion and frustration among the family over the technical aspects of the study.<sup>204</sup> In the case of the Woodsons, genetic evidence, treated as objective and conclusive, meant that a previously settled identity was wrong. It is factually true that no *genetic* connection exists between Woodson and Jefferson; this does not mean that other forms of social bond could not exist that might be equally constitutive of identity.

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<sup>203</sup> Alondra Nelson, "Genetic Genealogy Testing and the Pursuit of African Ancestry," *Social Studies of Science* 38, no. 5 (October 2008): 761-762.

<sup>204</sup> See Sloan R. Williams, "Genetic Genealogy: The Woodson Family Experience," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 29 (2005): 225-252.

Stories concerning unexpected results and the emotional toll of genetic testing form another component of the discourse. A February 2006 *Newsweek* article notes the experience of Wayne Joseph, an African American *Newsweek* writer, who tested his DNA for insight into his mixed race ancestry. The results indicated he had “No African blood at all.” Instead he was a mix of Indo-European, Native American, and East Asian. Joseph spent a year re-thinking the “decisions he’d made based on his identity as a black man: his first marriage, his choice of high school, his interest in African-American literature.” At the end of the “soul searching,” Joseph saw himself not as “black” but rather as a “metaphor for America.”<sup>205</sup> In contrast to the Woodson family’s experience, Joseph’s response indicates that genetic evidence can call for revision rather than out-and-out denial of a previously settled identity; in Joseph’s case, seeing himself as a “metaphor for America” implies no single ethnic identity. Admixed individuals, notes Jennifer Wagner, are neither one ethnicity nor another and neither do they represent an “intersection of ethnicities,” at least biologically.<sup>206</sup>

Genetic genealogy, according to a number of commentators, extends a family network not only back through time but also out to previously unknown living relatives, establishing knowledge of additional social bonds between oneself and other previously unknown kin. An October 2007 *60 Minutes* episode, for example, profiled the story of Vy Higginsen and Marion West. Higginsen, an African American and director of the Mama Foundation for Arts in Harlem, was tracing the genealogy of her maternal grandmother but could only get as far as her grandmother’s father Robert West. Higginsen’s cousin James West agreed to a DNA test from Family Tree DNA, the results

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<sup>205</sup> Claudia Kalb, “In Our Blood, DNA Testing,” *Newsweek*, 6 February 2006.

<sup>206</sup> Jennifer K. Wagner, “Interpreting the Implications of DNA Ancestry Results,” 241.



of which matched several other men with the last name West. “Out of the blue,” Higginsen received a phone call from Marion West, a white cattle rancher from Poplar Bluff, Missouri. West told Higginsen, “I understand we’re cousins.” Upon invitation, Higginsen made the trip to Missouri, and West soon made the trip to New York. *60 Minutes* reporter Leslie Stahl concluded that the genetic connection between Higginsen and West “has made each of their worlds larger.”<sup>207</sup> Responses such as West’s and Higginsen’s suggest that genetic genealogy could expand the number of ancestors whose everyday life experiences factor into the production of one’s personal identity.

### **Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and *African American Lives***

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., through public programming, books and articles, argues that genealogy and family history provides a method for Americans of African descent to “ground” themselves by establishing a line of action between themselves and their ancestors and, with genetic testing, back to Africa itself. Gates has popularized the use of genetic genealogy as a means of overcoming the “brick walls” of slavery and the Middle Passage and to establish identities rooted in the historical experience of African Americans in slavery and in the soil of geographic Africa. Gates’ project is significant because of its exposure but also because Gates takes a nuanced approach to genetic genealogy and family history, emphasizing both traditional genealogy tools and interpretation of genetic evidence in light of scholarship concerning the history of the African slave trade rather than treating DNA evidence as the sole determining factor in establishing a genealogical social bond.

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<sup>207</sup> *60 Minutes*, “Rebuilding the Family Tree,” 7 October 2007.

According to Gates' account in a 2008 *New Yorker* article, his encounter with genealogy began at the death of his grandfather in 1960, when he was nine years old.<sup>208</sup> The scrapbooks found among his grandfather's possessions included an obituary notice for Jane Gates, a former slave and matriarch of the Gates family; this, said Gates' father, "is your great-great-grandmother. And she is the oldest Gates." Gates writes that soon after the funeral he became "obsessed" with his family tree. Gates was particularly interested in his paternal lineage. The Gates' were both light-skinned and owned property in Cumberland, Maryland, and if any "distinction" in the family was to be found, it would be on the Gates side. The genealogical assumption appears in Gates' *New Yorker* narrative. He writes, "Each new name that I was able to find and print in my notebook was another link to the colored past that had produced, by fits and starts, but also, inevitably, the person I had become and was becoming."<sup>209</sup> Through his family history research, Gates made visible to himself a chain of action, moving from ancestors to himself, constitutive of the "person I had become and was becoming."

Gates' genealogy research followed a fairly traditional path but eventually required turning to then-unconventional methods to solve an outstanding family mystery concerning Jane Gates. Census data provided additional facts about Jane Gates which were not part of the family's "oral lore," for example that Jane Gates was an "illiterate mulatto." Family tradition held that Gates' great-grandfather was the son of Jane Gates and her slave-owner Samuel Brady, and documentary records suggested that this part of

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<sup>208</sup> The following story is also recounted in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Finding Oprah's Roots, Finding Your Own* (New York: Random House, 2007), 21-23; and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *In Search of Our Roots: How 19 Extraordinary African Americans Reclaimed Their Past* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2009), 2-5.

<sup>209</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Family Matters: When science clashes with ancestral lore," *New Yorker*, 1 December 2008, 36.

family tradition was accurate. Gates turned to DNA testing to “prove or disprove the family story” about Gates’ paternal lineage. Using the *Cumberland Times* and the Brady-family online forum, Gates located two living descendents of Samuel Brady who agreed to DNA testing; the DNA tests indicated “without a doubt, that Samuel Brady was not the father of Jane Gates’ children.” The Gates family reacted with disbelief. Aunt Helen, Gates writes, “summed up the reaction of just about all the Gates family members: ‘I’ve been a Brady eighty-nine years, and I am still a Brady, no matter what that test says’.” Gates, however, described the feeling as similar to “being orphaned.” But a combination of genetic technology and traditional genealogy could still help solve the mystery of the paternity of Jane Gates’ children. Using the other surnames associated with Gates’ Y-DNA maker, Gates compiled a list of names found in the 1850 and 1860 Censuses living in Alleghany County and is seeking male descendents to be tested. “With a little patience, and a lot of luck,” writes Gates, “perhaps DNA can solve the last remaining mystery in the Gates family line, the secret that Jane Gates took with her to her grave.”<sup>210</sup> Gates’ narrative highlights the benefits but also potential loss that can accompany DNA testing, which perhaps informs his advocacy of genetic genealogy in African American family history research.

Prior to the 2010 PBS series *Faces of America*, Gates’ advocacy for genetic genealogy had been directed towards African American family history research. Gates produced two PBS series, *African American Lives* in February 2006 and *African American Lives II* in February 2008, which profiled family histories of well-known African American actors, writers, and academics. Building off *African American Lives*,

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<sup>210</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Family Matters: When science clashes with ancestral lore,” *New Yorker*, 1 December 2008, 37.

Gates published two books, *Finding Oprah's Roots, Finding Your Own* in 2007 and *In Search of Our Roots: How 19 Extraordinary African Americans Reclaimed Their Past* in 2009. These works specifically address African American audiences. Gates offers this audience a number of reasons for taking up family history and genetic genealogy in particular, including the profound recognition that modern Africans and African Americans share many physical features and some cultural customs. But more significantly, in these works Gates makes the argument that genealogy and genetic testing provides a method for African Americans to bridge defining features of the African American historical experience – slavery and the Middle Passage – that destroyed the transmission of African culture, e.g. language, customs, etc., and obliterated family bonds.<sup>211</sup> As Gates says in *African American Lives*, there was one thing that slave ancestors brought with them to the New World that slavery could not take away: their DNA found in their living descendants.

The consequences of the Atlantic slave trade, Gates argues, are deep for both African Americans as a social group and as individuals descended from African slaves. Jim Crow legislation and social customs, slavery, the Middle Passage – these experiences, writes Gates, still affect African Americans as a historical group, “crippling our ability to know ourselves by connecting with our family’s past in the way that so many White Americans can,” continuing the internalization of “doubt and fears about who we are as a people and what we can accomplish.”<sup>212</sup> Like the leaders and commentators on African American genealogy practice during the 1970s and `80s, Gates

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<sup>211</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “We Are All Africans: Genealogical research and DNA testing can reveal your ethnic connections to Africa,” *Ebony*, December 2007, 134.

<sup>212</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “We Are All Africans: Genealogical research and DNA testing can reveal your ethnic connections to Africa,” *Ebony*, December 2007, 134.

sees family history as a means of re-writing American history in general, testifying to the presence and contributions of African Americans to the nation's success. But on a personal level, genealogy and family history serves to "ground" a person. Gates describes grounding as the result of becoming intimate with "one's own people's past":

We are grounded by knowing where our grandparents lived, what they did, and from where their own grandparents came. We are grounded by knowing the past well enough to connect it to our lives today. And this process confers a certain peculiar sense of pride that cannot be obtained by other means, especially for those of us previously denied access to our family's history.<sup>213</sup>

Genealogy and family history, in Gates' estimation, is not only a political tool for reconstructing American history but also an instrument of personal pride and inspiration, reconstructing continuity between oneself and one's ancestors. The "loss of names" – the inability to pass on names to children as a result of the slave trade – functioned to break the continuity between ancestors and descendants, but so did the destruction of African culture after enslavement in the United States. With no records tracing African ancestors back to Africa, one's African roots could only extend to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, Gates says. DNA testing changes that, opening the opportunity to establish continuity even further back, to create deeper "roots."<sup>214</sup>

Gates' family history research method is a combination of traditional genealogy, DNA testing, and historical analysis. In both the *African American Lives* series and

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<sup>213</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Finding Oprah's Roots, Finding Your Own*, 15.

<sup>214</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *In Search of Our Roots*, 6-9.

written works based on those programs, Gates follows the lives of numerous “illustrious” African Americans backwards through time, tracing the paper trail through census records, Freedmen’s Bureau and Freedmen’s Bank records, court documents, land grants, and other forms of documentary evidence back to the conclusion of the Civil War and emancipation of American slaves. Slavery forms the first major “fog” for Americans descended from slaves. The same problems raised during the 1970s as African American genealogy became a distinct subfield of genealogy practice, i.e. the problem of name changes and nameless pieces of “property,” the continual breakup of families, the lack of records concerning slave marriages and births, continue to be problems. A major difference though is that records are more readily available through their digitization and indexing.

The genetic genealogy component of Gates’ method comes with its own complications and ambiguities. Africa, as the geographic origin of all humanity, contains the largest variation of genetic material in the world. Mark Shriver and Rick Kittles note that a number of haplotypes appear in the majority of West and Central African populations, though there are a few rarer types that mark particular ethnic groups; additionally, the history of migrations on the continent mean that genetic matches with present-day Africans do not necessarily represent the geographic origins of a person, i.e. present-day populations do not reflect the populations living in a geographic area at the time of enslavement.<sup>215</sup> Gates’ own experience with genetic genealogy is marked by a mistaken interpretation of results. Kittles’ 2000 analysis of Gates’ DNA pointed to Egypt and Nubian ethnicity. But a second test of Gates’ DNA in 2005 revealed no African

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<sup>215</sup> Mark D. Shriver and Rick A. Kittles, “Genetic ancestry and the search for personalized genetic histories,” *Nature Reviews* 5 (August 2004): 612.

ancestry at all but rather led to European ancestry.<sup>216</sup> The necessity for scholarly historical analysis of genetic testing results – i.e. when testing results point to multiple ethnic groups, determining a person’s most likely ethnic origins based on traditional genealogy and historical research on the Atlantic slave trade – led Gates to found his own DNA testing company in collaboration with Family Tree DNA and the Inkwell Foundation. African DNA, founded in 2007, provides consumers with not only DNA results but also extended historical and anthropological analysis of those results. The “genetic and the genealogical,” Gates writes, “can combine to give each of us a sense of place, a sense of rootedness, within that grand sweep of evolution that is our common history as human beings, helping us to understand . . . from which particular branch or twig of the forest of human development we’ve descended.”<sup>217</sup>

On one hand, Gates’ interest in genealogy in general and genetic genealogy in particular lies in its potential political thrust, which is to reformulate the narrative of not only African American history but American history in general. Oprah Winfrey’s family history, for example, includes her great-great-grandfather Constance Winfrey, a former slave who through thrift and hard work became a successful farmer and land owner and taught himself to read and write. Constance Winfrey, noted Gates, thrived during the nadir of African American history, showing himself to be just as “authentic – and meaningful – a hero” as people like Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington.<sup>218</sup> Further, Gates accounted for Winfrey’s devotion to expanding educational opportunities

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<sup>216</sup> Keith J. Winstein, “Harvard’s Gates Refines Genetic-Ancestry Searches for Blacks,” *Wall Street Journal*, 15 November 2007.

<sup>217</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Finding Oprah’s Roots, Finding Your Own*, 16.

<sup>218</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Finding Oprah’s Roots, Finding Your Own*, 138.

by pointing to a long line of ancestors who “loved education.”<sup>219</sup> Though Winfrey’s slave ancestors go unnamed, Gates was able to provide the slave schedule for some. These records mark the existence of Winfrey’s slave progenitors and illustrate the link between her and the slave experience. According to Winfrey, the reason for telling the story of American slavery – as she did in the 1998 film *Beloved* – is because, as she said, “My strength comes from their strength”; people considered and treated as “nothing more than property” survived, sometimes even flourishing as Constance Winfrey did.<sup>220</sup> In Gates’ view, when “properly understood,” the “narrative of African American history would consist of stories and themes generalized from the rediscovered experiences of our own ancestors.” Their contributions to American society and culture, their daily struggles and survival, would collectively “become the rule, and not the exception,” as has been the case in the past when African Americans were missing from “official” American history.<sup>221</sup>

The political thrust of Gates’ project extends to challenging American cultural images of Africa. The genetic results of the *African American Lives* guests encouraged a revision of their previously held images of Africa itself. In discussions with Gates, the guests recalled their childhood impressions of Africa as the “dark continent,” the home of Tarzan and naked dancing natives, seen through the lens of *National Geographic* photographers. Lineage DNA testing results invited guests to conjure up Africa as home, as a source of self, as a place with which they have a substantive bond. Actor Chris Tucker’s DNA results led to a connection between himself and the Angolan people; with

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<sup>219</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Finding Oprah’s Roots, Finding Your Own*, 132, 134.

<sup>220</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Finding Oprah’s Roots, Finding Your Own*, 120-123.

<sup>221</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *In Search of Our Roots*, 7.



Gates in tow, Tucker's "Alex Haley moment" unfolds on the screen, and viewers watch Tucker's encounter with the Angolan landscape and people, bringing about a more complicated and sympathetic understanding on the part of Tucker toward the continent of Africa. Actor Don Cheadle explained the significance of his lineage results, which led to multiple tribes living in present-day Cameroon, in terms of continuity: "this is my lineage, this is the path that I walked, and I can look back and see the footprints that got me here where I'm standing."<sup>222</sup>

Interestingly, Gates found that his guests were more emotionally moved by learning about their ancestors in the United States than learning about their genetic bond to a particular region or ethnic group in Africa.<sup>223</sup> Gates, to my knowledge, does not offer an explanation for this tendency in his guests, but one can recognize that the paper trail which makes visible the continuity between descendents and ancestors is a more objective, concrete representation of a social bond than the more "imagined" social bond between oneself and present-day Africans constituted by a DNA match. The bond provided by DNA evidence is based on shared bio-genetic material but lacks the visible chain of action, the chain of names that comes with traditional genealogy, despite the fact that the social bond conjured up by DNA evidence is existentially "real."

While Gates' project works towards establishing continuity between descendents and ancestors, the genetic genealogy component equally disrupts and complicates social and personal identities. Admixture testing results were the first ones revealed during *African American Lives*. The analysis of Gates' DNA markers revealed that roughly 50% of Gates' ancestry was likely of European origin, while the remaining 50% likely derives

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<sup>222</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *In Search of Our Roots*, 359.

<sup>223</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *In Search of Our Roots*, 12.

from sub-Saharan Africa. (The description of the results into fractions hearkens back to Galton's law of ancestral inheritance, which conjures an image of a person fragmented into individual segments contributed by specific ancestors.) Gates jokingly responded to his results with questions about whether he even still counts as an African American: Do I still qualify for affirmative action programs? Can I still sing the blues? Do I need to give up my chair in the African American Studies Department?<sup>224</sup> Though Gates asked these questions in jest, they are consequential when material resources or cultural affiliation is at stake, as is the case for the Black Seminoles referenced above.

Recognition of mixed race heritage may or may not entail a reformulation of one's personal identity. Winfrey's DNA results, for example, challenged her knowledge of a previous constitutive social bond. Winfrey, who expressed a "sense of connection" to the Zulu people and present-day South Africa, found her ancestry pointed not to the Zulus but rather to the Kpelle people of present-day Liberia.<sup>225</sup> Even though Winfrey did not have a Zulu connection, a source of disappointment, her new-found connections to African peoples elicited self-reflection; Gates writes: "Oprah was stunned by the news. 'That's me,' she said somewhat wistfully, looking at the charts of her DNA that I had handed her. 'I'm Kpelle. I feel empowered by this.'"<sup>226</sup> Other guests, however, did not have this experience. Cheadle's admixture results revealed he was 18% percent European, but he did not think it would change his sense of self. "In America I have to

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<sup>224</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *African American Lives*, DVD (PBS Home Video, 2006); see also Troy Duster, "Deep Roots and Tangled Branches," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 22 (2006): 13-14.

<sup>225</sup> A July 2005 piece in *Jet Magazine* reports that Winfrey had determined through a DNA test that she was related to the Zulu people of present-day South Africa; this previous test is unmentioned in *African American Lives*. See "Oprah Reveals She is a Descendant of Zulus," *Jet*, 4 July 2005, 40.

<sup>226</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Finding Oprah's Roots, Finding Your Own*, 164.

deal with the problems that black people in America have to deal with,” said Cheadle. “I have the struggles that black people in America have. So it’s interesting to know, but it doesn’t change me.”<sup>227</sup> Bliss Broyard, daughter of writer and literary critic Anatole Broyard, who passed as white for much of his professional life, did not anticipate that her admixture results, which indicated she is 17.2% sub-Saharan African, would change her sense of self. “I can decide how much I want this to be a part of who I am,” said Broyard. “In a lot of people, their race is so apparent that they don’t have any control over how they are seen.”<sup>228</sup> Though these admixture tests did not affect their sense of identity, both Cheadle and Broyard expressed the value of tracing their family history for establishing a sense of completeness once missing in their lives.

Why does genealogy and family history matter, though, in the grand scheme of things, according to Gates? “Tracing one’s family tree won’t solve all of the problems facing Black America,” Gates acknowledges, “but this sort of knowledge about one’s past most certainly can help to ground our people in the very best that the African American tradition has achieved, the fundamental principles that enabled our people not only to endure, but to rise and thrive.”<sup>229</sup> Gates’ work illustrates a more nuanced approach to incorporating genetic evidence in the construction of a genealogy and family history, one which does not allow one piece of bio-based evidence to dominate or determine personal and social identity. Gates’ *African American Lives* project and his own family history research show multiple potential consequences of genetic testing for ancestry. DNA is not “who you are” but is rather a tool among others for getting

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<sup>227</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *In Search of Our Roots*, 358.

<sup>228</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *In Search of Our Roots*, 393-394.

<sup>229</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Finding Oprah’s Roots, Finding Your Own*, 169.

“grounded,” a tool for producing knowledge of a social bond between oneself and one’s ancestors.

### **Discussion**

Genetic genealogy discourse, including Gates’ African American family history project, shows that DNA evidence, treated as objective evidence of a social bond based on shared bio-genetic substance, exposes the constructed nature of identity. Scholars in the “soft sciences” rightfully call attention to the potential of genetic technologies and research into human diversity to re-essentialize the concept of race, but DNA testing for the purposes of ancestry also point to ways in which genetic technologies and research make identities problematic by extending or rupturing presumed continuity between ancestors and descendants. For example, admixture analyses can confirm, disprove, or expose multiple “racial” lineages and lineage-based analyses can establish social bonds or rupture previously held knowledge of relationships. Genetic genealogy can produce knowledge of an existential bond between persons or between a person and a group, but this knowledge is partial, concerning at most only two lines of ascent.

The discourse examined in this section suggests that one cannot rely on genetic evidence alone to determine “who you are.” Treating DNA markers alone as determiners of personal and social identity is reductionist and ignores other possible models of a genealogical social bond, e.g. cultural tradition, family lore. Native Americans, Jews, and the Latter-day Saints all serve as examples of instances where genetic evidence comes into conflict with traditional sources of cultural authority. In this regards, Gates’ approach to family history research can be held up as a more appropriate model of employing genetic evidence in making visible a social bond between ancestors and

descendants and extending knowledge of that social bond beyond what is available through the “paper trail.” Rather than endowing DNA evidence with complete authority, Gates also employs traditional genealogy research and scholarly analysis in the construction of a genealogy, in producing evidence of social bonds between a person and ancestors and present-day ethnic groups.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Frederick Douglass, in his final diary entry in 1895, wrote “Still no evidence of my birth date.” Reflecting on this last word from Douglass, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. wrote that “knowledge of linear time and how to record it, the knowledge of one’s name along with one’s birth date, and the capacity to write both” was the “hidden secret of the whole of African American history.” Names and birth dates are markers of human existence; they anchor a person in time and place, identifying the “links in a chain” from one generation to the next and announcing to others “we were here.”<sup>230</sup> The three cases of genealogy discourse examined in this portion of the study illustrate how genealogy and family history was and continues to be seen as a method of establishing points in a chain of action that link a person to his or her ancestors, making visible their social bond across multiple generations. The genealogy discourse that emerged in the 1970s and early ‘80s suggested that constructing continuity between oneself and one’s ancestors contributes to a sense of personal and social identity, often with attendant social obligations and political ramifications; and that identity comes through a process of getting “rooted,” i.e. locating oneself in an existential chain of action.

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<sup>230</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Finding Oprah’s Roots, Finding Your Own*, 16-17.

In contrast to genealogy discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which was shaped by a larger bio-racial framework of group hierarchies and privileged lineages, the genealogy discourse which emerged out of the “new genealogy” craze situated genealogy and family history as a form of identity-work. Identity, in this context, was interpreted as the product of group experience. In the context of the genealogical assumption, the continuity between oneself and one’s ancestors, made visible through genealogy and family history, is evidence of one’s location in historical time and place, as the product of human choices, struggles, and survival. Genealogy and family history provide access to historical group experience, which – suggesting a “relationship of identity” – one recognizes as one’s own experience as well. The historical experience of one’s ancestors is not existentially the same as one’s own, since each concrete person is distinct from another. The constitutive aspect of the social bond results from recognizing oneself as the outcome of the actions and experiences of one’s progenitors – of recognizing past others as “my people” and their historical experiences as “my story.”

All three cases of genealogy discourse just considered are shaped by ruptures in the continuity between ancestors and descendants and unique historical “brick-wall” circumstances. For Americans of African descent, the system of American slavery actively sought to obliterate African cultural traditions and languages, break family bonds through separation and sexual violence, prevent the creation of personal records, and silence collective memory. Two centuries of persecution and discrimination on one hand prevented the creation of and access to records and on the other produced a shameful image of black ignorance and pathology which dominated American culture, calling into

question among both whites and blacks whether Americans of African descent even had a history worth considering. Americans of Jewish descent encountered rupture primarily in the form of assimilation and the Holocaust. Jewish Americans seeking to trace their family history during the 1970s and early '80s faced the genocide of European Jewry by National Socialism, which resulted not only in the death of six million individuals but also a loss of knowledge concerning the actual fates of victims and the survival of relatives. Furthermore, one's Jewish heritage was often obscured through the assimilation of immigrants to the United States, which often brought about, among other things, name changes and a loss of cultural traditions. Such "brick-wall" circumstances signify the rupture of continuity between ancestors and descendents, and African and Jewish American genealogists organized to surmount these obstacles – thereby making genealogy and family, in this historical context, a constructive practice rather than a defensive one as seen in the cases of the Daughters of the American Revolution and eugenics movement.

Unlike the bio-racial framework informing late nineteenth and early twentieth century genealogy discourse, the notion of identity allows ancestral knowledge to point in multiple directions. On one hand, ancestral knowledge produced through genealogy and family history was interpreted as revealing something "deep" and essential about a person. For example, in the context of genetic genealogy, DNA evidence of ancestry is often treated as more objective evidence of identity, over-riding family tradition or long-held ideas about oneself. Or in all three cases of genealogy discourse, genealogy and family history, in assembling evidence of continuity between oneself and one's ancestors, produced knowledge of one's debt to those ancestors, who – sometimes struggling and

sometimes thriving – survived to generate you. On the other hand, particularly in the case of genetic genealogy, the sense of personal identity can be called into question by evidence collected through genealogical research. Identity, in such circumstances, may be interpreted as mistaken or misunderstood and alternatively recognized as something constructed, something that changes or is added to.

The cases considered above also illuminate the role genealogy and family history potentially plays in structuring social identity. In the case of African American genealogy, a revised version of the nation is being constructed through family history research and poses a political challenge to those who argue that Americans of African descent were burdens rather than contributors to the American story. An individual's family history provides evidence of the contributions of African Americans to the founding, settlement, and building of the United States; it says "our people built this country too." The African American case demonstrates the malleable nature of identity. African American genealogy discourse employs family history as a method of changing what it means to be black in America; an individual's family provides evidence of the presence of African Americans in the daily life of American society and culture, as players in the American story. Likewise Jewish American genealogy itself contains an implicit political challenge to historical global efforts at erasure, e.g. Spanish Inquisition, Holocaust, Diaspora; the continuity established between ancestors and descendents is evidence of survival. According to the discourse produced by Kurzweil, Rottenberg, and other members of the early Jewish American genealogy movement, genealogy and family history is one way of expressing Jewish identity, fulfilling the religious imperative to "tell the story" and thereby sustain collective memory.



The cases indicate various levels of “imagined-ness” of continuity between ancestors and descendents. In the case of 1970s and early `80s African American genealogy discourse, the inability to reach past slavery and the Middle Passage – except in the extraordinary case of Alex Haley – contributed to a greater degree of concreteness in the continuity between ancestors and descendents. The majority of descendents of African slaves could potentially reconstruct a chain of action from ancestors to descendents at least to 1870, the first census year in which blacks appeared as free, named individuals. A similar degree of concreteness existed in Jewish American genealogy discourse to a point. Naturalization records and passenger manifests help enable Jewish Americans to trace a chain of ancestors back to European homelands, and the Holocaust, an event of recent memory, provides a motivation for determining the fate of family members. But Jewish American genealogy of the period also includes a component that postulates a social bond between a Jewish person and the ancient Hebrew patriarchs and matriarchs, a social bond sustained by a religious tradition which views the entire Jewish people as a family bonded through lineage. At this level, a documented chain of action, a fundamental goal of genealogy practice, is impossible but the genealogical assumption continues to function through an “imagined” lineage. Being a Jew, in Kurzweil’s formulation, entails recognizing oneself as a child of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and part of the larger family of the Jewish people. These are not options for constructing Jewish identity but constitutive of Jewish identity. African Americans as a group do not have a centuries old cultural narrative of peoplehood and founding lineages, which may mark the strongest difference in the two cases of genealogy discourse. DNA evidence may serve to create a distant connection between an African American and a

present-day African ethnic group but would still lack the sustaining and unifying narrative found in the Jewish case.

## **Conclusion**

The present inquiry sought to accomplish two things: first, to establish the existence of a genealogical assumption and begin defining what it has meant over time and across contexts and second, to make the genealogical assumption problematic by comparing and contrasting specific historical formulations of the assumption, represented by six cases of American genealogy discourse. The inquiry was prompted by questions concerning the implications of the genealogical assumption for one's sense of social location, i.e. relatedness to others. It can be concluded from the inquiry that the assumption is neither a completely satisfactory nor entirely unsatisfactory way of articulating a social bond which may constitute – to some extent and for some people – a personal or social identity.

### **What is the genealogical assumption? Some Broad Conclusions:**

It should be recalled that there are two components of the genealogical assumption. First is the notion that “who you are” is connected to who your ancestors are or the geographic origin of those ancestors. This first element of the genealogical assumption postulates a constitutive social bond between a person and living and past others recognized as ancestors. The second aspect of the genealogical assumption holds that through genealogy, i.e. documented family history, the social bond between ancestors and descendents is made visible; through the collection and interpretation of records concerning the “natural facts” of parentage and kinship or the everyday lives of past others – birth and death certificates, naturalization records, wills and probate proceedings, for example – knowledge of the social bond between a person and his or her ancestors is objectively manifested. The present monograph does not argue that the

genealogical assumption motivates all family history research or encompasses all aspects of genealogy and family history practice, but it does argue that the genealogical assumption is a complicated and at times unsettling piece of the existing American cultural fabric, capable of accommodating multiple ends depending upon historical context.

The case studies examined in the monograph illustrate that the genealogical assumption has been articulated in multiple and sometimes conflicting ways in American genealogy discourse over time. The inquiry highlighted differences in formulations of the genealogical assumption on two levels: over two broad historical periods and over contemporaneous cases in these two periods. The research showed that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the genealogical assumption was formulated in reference to existing cultural ideas concerning biology-based racial classification and the science of heredity; genealogical evidence established the existence of a social bond based primarily on a belief in shared material substance, i.e. one's hereditary inheritance. The cases of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the American eugenics movement illustrated how different understandings of the mechanics of heredity – i.e. inheritance of acquired characters and Mendelian genetics – factored into interpretations of what genealogy and family history revealed about a human being and the uses to which genealogy and family could be put, e.g. as a guidepost for right living or as a measure of hereditary “fitness.” The case of the Latter-day Saints showed that the larger concept of salvation history into which individual Saints were interpellated through their genealogy practice also drew upon circulating cultural notions about Anglo-Saxon superiority and inferior racial lineage groups, e.g. Native Americans, blacks.

In contrast, the genealogical assumption was broadly articulated during the “new genealogy” craze of the 1970s and `80s in terms of identity. As was true in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century cases, African American and Jewish American genealogy discourse treated genealogy and family history as a method of inserting oneself into a chain of historical action with one’s ancestors. The social bond in these cases rested on evidence of continuity between ancestors and descendents, but rather than dealing strictly with the identification of bonds represented by shared substance, these cases focused primarily on the everyday lives of ancestors. For example, by bringing to light the accomplishments and contributions of one’s black ancestors to American society and culture, an individual African American participated in the reshaping of what it meant to be black in America; genealogy and family history provided evidence that African Americans were not absent from the American national narrative but rather participated alongside everyone in the daily life of the nation. Genetic genealogy was treated as an additional tool for reconstructing and expanding the meaning of African American identity by potentially providing African Americans a method for pinpointing an ethnic homeland, as so many other Americans had previously accomplished in their own genealogy and family history research. The Jewish American case also demonstrated how genealogy and family history was put forth as a method for discovering and enacting group identity. According to the discourse produced by leaders of the Jewish American genealogy movement, every individual Jew’s genealogy and family history formed part of the larger collective historical experience of the Jewish people; through genealogy and family history, the individual Jew fulfilled a religious

imperative to honor the memory of ancestors and sustain the collective memory of the Jewish people.

A significant aspect of the genealogical assumption concerns the correct method of obtaining knowledge of the bond between a person and his or her ancestors, the process of ancestral knowledge production, of making the “natural facts” of parentage known. The case studies taken together illustrate that the rules regarding the production of ancestral knowledge, i.e. knowledge of a social bond, were never consistent over time or completely uncontested. Among the issues raised by the case studies were what counts as appropriate evidence of the bond between a person and her or his ancestors. The Daughters of the American Revolution’s eligibility debate and African American genealogy discourse, for instance, raised issues about whether oral accounts of ancestral information should factor into the production of ancestral knowledge. Is oral family tradition satisfactory evidence of a social bond between a person and ancestors? Haley and other black genealogists clearly thought so. While family stories about heroic patriots formed the meat of a daughter’s claim to membership, the organization determined that it must rest on clearly documented bones. In the case of African American genealogy, which was defined in part by group-specific research challenges, oral tradition was given greater value, if not absolute value, in a person’s ancestral claims. Eugenics leaders and advocates, however, argued that “traditional” documentary records were insufficient for understanding the hereditary makeup of a person and suggested instead that photographs and descriptions of mental and emotional character traits were of greater value in the creation of a family record. The DAR and eugenics cases also illustrated differences over which ancestors were considered most important in

determining “who you are”; the Daughters focused almost exclusively on the activities of one distant patriot ancestor while eugenicists argued that information regarding all of one’s closest “blood” relatives and their children was necessary for making sense of a person’s hereditary inheritance.

The cases also highlighted how genealogy practice, as a method of constructing knowledge of the constitutive social bond between ancestors and descendants, could reveal the constructed nature of identity. For example, the DAR, African American, Jewish American, and genetic genealogy cases highlighted the dilemmas resulting from gaps in the “paper trail” due to gender and racial discrimination, persecution and genocide. Genealogy and family history provided Americans descended from African slaves and Jews whose immigrant ancestors melded into dominant American culture a method of “grounding” themselves in a restored chain of action. The cases also raised questions concerning the proper interpretation of information. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., for instance, employed the tool of genetic analysis but also sought to overcome its sometimes ambiguous conclusions through historical analysis of DNA results; traditional genealogy and scholarly analysis helped prevent one from succumbing to the pull of genetic essentialism.

Each of the cases of genealogy discourse illustrates how the genealogical assumption intersected with various kinds of “imagined communities” – not fictional communities but rather mental images of collectivities in the absence of face-to-face contact – which individuals were called upon to intervene in and contest through genealogy and family history. In the case of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the image of the nation conjured up by the organization relied on events associated with

the American Revolutionary War and cast patriots as heroic, principled figures who fought for, won, and came to *own* the nation; but the idea of the nation manufactured by the DAR's genealogy practice obscured the participation of other concrete persons, including slaves, indigenous peoples, and social reformers, in the growth and development of American society and culture. The nation conceived by the Daughters of the American Revolution and other heredity-based patriotic societies served multiple political aims, including sectional reconciliation and the maintenance of old-stock, upper and middle class Anglo-Saxon hegemony in the face of rapid urbanization and increased immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. The genealogical work required for membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution provided evidence to other members of the organization and to the wider public of a Daughter's claim to membership in the nation and her stake in its future. Eugenics leaders and advocates in the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century summoned up a vision of the nation as "patient," which depending upon human choice would remain healthy and fit or fall victim to infection, i.e. "bad" racial stock intermingling with old Anglo-Saxon stock or "degenerate" members of society reproducing more quickly and coming to political dominance. Eugenicists argued that genealogy provided a tool for understanding and protecting one's hereditary endowment by, for instance, carefully selecting marriage partners, and for weeding out bad-stock.

A comparison of cases shows that genealogy and family history was treated not only as a means of preserving dominance but was also used as a method of challenging dominant renderings of the nation. During the 1970s and early '80s, minority groups and many newer-stock whites began re-valuing their ancestral heritage and in the process



challenged the dominant interpretation of the nation held by groups such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, e.g. the image of the Ellis Island immigrant displacing the image of the minute man. In the case of African American genealogy discourse in particular, one rendering of the nation that excluded African Americans as contributors to America's development and growth was challenged by another vision of that nation which highlighted the lived experiences and involvement of blacks in American society and culture. Genealogy and family history contributed evidence that Americans of African descent were players in the American story as well. The nation, however, was not the only "imagined community" conjured up by American genealogy discourse.

The cases of Mormon and Jewish American genealogy discourses called upon the historical experiences of peoples and the idea of peoplehood. The "imagined communities" in these cases were based on ideas about shared historical experiences; genealogy and family history were treated as methods for establishing continuity between oneself and one's ancestors, a process which grafted individual persons into the collective histories of peoples. For the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Latter-day Saints, genealogy provided a way of locating oneself within a chosen lineage and enacting a divine mission of universal salvation. In Jewish genealogy discourse, genealogy and family history was treated as a method of perpetuating Jewish identity in conditions of diaspora; the language of family and lineage was extended to the entirety of the Jewish people and sustained through biblical, rabbinical, and family genealogies.

The examination of American genealogy discourse also illustrated how, based on the genealogical assumption, genealogy and family history could be used to confer rights and responsibilities upon persons or fulfilled social obligations to living and past others.

Ancestral knowledge, in numerous cases discussed in the study, entailed recognition of one's responsibility to ancestors. According to the genealogy discourse produced by the Daughters of the American Revolution, the descendants of the Revolutionary-era patriots "inherited" a set of characteristics and principles which they were charged with perpetuating not only in their own children, through maintaining certain standards of behavior and thought among themselves and their children, but also among the American public at large, through erecting monuments, preserving artifacts, and carrying out acts of commemoration. In other cases, genealogy and family history itself was considered a means of fulfilling a social obligation established through knowledge of the social bond between oneself and one's ancestors. Mormon genealogy discourse indicated that Latter-day Saints were responsible for the eternal salvation of their family members, reminding Church members that someday they would be held accountable by their deceased loved-ones in the Spirit World and they would not want to be found negligible for their ancestors' loss of salvation. In the case of Jewish American genealogy, the practice of genealogy and family history satisfied an imperative to "tell the story" of the Jewish historical experience. Each individual Jew's name, story, and family relationships were conceptualized as part of the collective Jewish historical experience and therefore held value; genealogy and family history itself perpetuated and honored the memories of those individual Jews. Genealogy and family history reinforced Jewish identity by suturing an individual Jew into relationships of responsibility with one's family, both one's immediate progenitors and offspring but also the Jewish people as a whole.

### **Loose Threads, Tensions, and Potential in the Genealogical Assumption**

The examination of multiple historically specific articulations of the genealogical assumption points to the conclusion that the genealogical assumption – theoretically – is neither a completely satisfactory nor entirely unsatisfactory way to conceptualize “who you are,” in terms of personal or social identity. The genealogical assumption does not always lead to ends which promote human flourishing. Without a doubt, it is easy to disparage the way eugenics leaders and advocates called upon the genealogical assumption to promote genealogy and family history for eugenical ends, e.g. forced sterilization, or the elitist implications and exclusionary outcome of the Daughters of the American Revolution’s genealogy practice. It is also potentially dangerous to accept genetic evidence as *the* determining factor in establishing group membership and ignoring the role of shared multi-generational history, which also contributes in material, emotional, and cultural ways to the formation of personal and social identity. But the inquiry also leads me to believe that genealogy and family history, conducted under the genealogical assumption, may represent a useful and perhaps significant method of getting “grounded” in conditions of post-modernity, social conditions which expand human interdependence while obscuring social relationships.

Going into the inquiry, I had already come down on the side of genealogy and family history as being a constructivist practice, i.e. a *production* of ancestral knowledge, and debates raised through the cases – concerning what counts as evidence, which ancestors matter in determining “who you are,” etc. – confirms the constructed nature of the objective representation resulting from genealogy practice. But a number of questions remain open. For example, what is basis of the social bond suggested by the

genealogical assumption based? The bond could rest on a belief in shared substance, e.g. “blood” or DNA, or on a multi-generational commitment among family members to sustain, support, and nourish one another, evidenced in the survival of the family line. Another lingering question concerns the constitutive element of social bond postulated by the genealogical assumption. The suggested permanence of the social bond between ancestors and descendants and its primacy in determining “who you are” raised concerns because of the potential challenge it poses to other forms of human association that might be called upon for solving problems at the intersection between what sociologist C. Wright Mills called “personal troubles” and “public issues.” It is reasonable to ask if family, lineage groups, etc. distract from the rational discourse necessary for collective problem-solving. The potential for irrational exclusion exists when the language of family and lineage is extended to other social units, e.g. the nation as “homeland” or political leaders as “fathers” or “mothers” of the nation.

The idea of “grounding,” of getting “rooted” through genealogy and family history is the most compelling aspect of the genealogical assumption. The genealogical assumption puts a person in a set of face-to-face and imagined relationships that often involve commitment to others. It remains to be asked: why does “grounding” through genealogy and family history even seem like something someone needs to do? Both historical moments investigated in this study are periods of cultural and social upheaval – industrialization, urbanization, mass immigration, imperialist expansion during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; and a collapse in confidence in government following Vietnam, Watergate, the oil crisis, and the end of the post-World War II economic boom in the last decades of the twentieth century. Further investigation of the

genealogical assumption should consider the relationship between the assumption and the conditions of modernity. Is there a correlation between small town community life prior to industrialization and a lack of interest in genealogy in the United States? Is there something about cultural and social conditions during the post-World War II economic boom which account for the lull in the cultural interest in ancestry and genealogy?

In the absence of its claims to primacy and permanence, the genealogical assumption perhaps offers a useful model – among others – for thinking about self and social identity. For example, during his interview for *Faces of America*, journalist Malcolm Gladwell was asked by Professor Gates about what the “most important factors” were in defining ourselves, “our own experiences, our families, our societies, or some combination?” Gladwell, taking a constructivist interpretation of identity, responded to Gates, I think the “more ways you can define yourself, the better off you are, the less likely you are to get trapped by a definition,” and “the less likely you are to judge someone very narrowly.” Genealogy and family history, in Gladwell’s estimation, added a “new dimension” that did not cancel out previous ways of defining himself. Self-definition, for Gladwell, is a “function of the knowledge about ourselves that we choose to expose ourselves to.”<sup>1</sup> For Gladwell, ancestral knowledge is neither a primary nor even a necessary element in identity formation; the genealogical assumption could be called upon by choice as one model among others for thinking about one’s bond to other human beings. When not taken as primary, the social bond can be deployed strategically, e.g. stressing one part of one’s ancestry over another in different contexts, thereby shifting affiliations depending upon circumstances.

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<sup>1</sup> “Malcolm Gladwell – Faces of America,” PBS, <<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/facesofamerica/profiles/malcolm-gladwell/9/>> (accessed June 2010).

The genealogical assumption postulates a *constitutive* social bond between ancestors and descendants, which is why genealogy and family history is indicative of “who you are.” But can the constitutive element of the social bond be merely a matter of choice, just one more way of thinking about self? Does the genealogical assumption point towards a “middle way” between constructivist and essentialist interpretations of social bonds constitutive of identity? Genealogy and family history illuminates an existential chain of action based on substantive bonds, perhaps referencing shared bio-genetic material but also possibly based on multi-generational commitments, responsibilities, obligations, and debt that solicits response. I would anticipate that the genealogical assumption might help in reformulating the notion of identity to include a concrete aspect passed between generations of human beings, perhaps in the form of financial inheritance or in a less tangible form such as a commitment to the emotional nourishment of one’s children.

Another consideration: genealogy, even in the context of the genealogical assumption, only amounts to an object, i.e. a visual representation of continuity between ancestors and descendants. But it takes more than the object, the genealogy itself, to achieve “grounding.” It also requires a moment of reflection. Future investigation of the genealogical assumption needs to address the degree to which that assumption factors into one’s approach to genealogy and family history. The activity of producing a genealogy is a forward-moving process that may reference “a past” but only exists in the present. Does the genealogical assumption and genealogy practice reflect cultural habit or a personal effort to resolve an existing indeterminate situation? A person comes to genealogy and family history with an existing identity, even if it is not an entirely

satisfying one. The African and Jewish American cases in particular illustrate how genealogy and family history can “heal” fragmented identities or reformulate one’s sense of self. Genealogy as a method of overcoming anxiety, of getting “grounded,” is not evident in all cases and is perhaps most apparent in cases where “rupture” has occurred. Might genealogy and family history prove psychologically satisfying regardless of an experience of “rupture”? And how might reflection on that activity shape future action?

Another tension evident in the cases concerns the material quality of the bond revealed by genealogy and family history and its more constructed or “imagined” aspects. In the case of Mormon genealogy discourse produced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, genealogy was treated, on the level of individual Saint, as a method of constructing an eternal family. Genealogy provided evidence of the existence of a family member in the Spirit World and that person’s familial relationship to others. With this information in hand, temple ordinances could be performed, sealing family members to one another for eternity. In this process of linking family members together, shared blood was not a qualification for being identified as a family member. However, the discourse also situated genealogy and family history as a method by which an individual Saint participated in the divine mission of a chosen racial lineage group, the descendants of Israel, of which the Mormons considered themselves members. On this macro-level, Mormon genealogy was interpreted in light of a larger concept of temporal and salvation history. In the case of Jewish American genealogy discourse, the significance of genealogy and family history pulled in contradictory directions, on one hand implying through biblical genealogies that all human beings derive from a common origin while on

the other hand genealogy and family history served to stake a claim as a member of a chosen people, descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The Mormon and Jewish genealogy cases in particular illustrate how the genealogical assumption can push the social bonds it conjures up outwards from the individual to ever wider “imagined communities.” The Mormon and Jewish American genealogy cases conceive of genealogy and family history as a method of anchoring a person in an expansive community of responsibility and rights-holders. The mechanics of Mormon genealogy practice, on the level of the individual Saint, entails the *construction* of a broad network of relationships going far past one’s immediate family, and that network is envisioned as both vertical – meaning it goes back through time – but also horizontal in that it connects existing souls on both sides of “the veil.” In the Mormon genealogy scheme, the relationships between living and past others are defined as interdependent, i.e. one’s personal salvation rests on the salvation of all. As in the Mormon case, Jewish American genealogy and family history makes visible an expansive network of debts and obligations. In contrast to the African American genealogy case, which also envisioned continuity between oneself and one’s ancestors in which the actions of one’s ancestors resulted in the existence of oneself, the Jewish American case treated one’s personal genealogy and family history as a link in the larger chain of Jewish peoplehood, a chain which ultimately leads back to Abraham and Sarah. In both cases, people are asked to anchor themselves in “imagined communities” that do not necessarily warrant face-to-face social relationships but entail a sense of commitment to others.

Of the texts encountered during research, a 1912 description of the genealogical assumption most clearly indicates the positive potential of the genealogical assumption



for the promotion of human flourishing. In the preface to his family history, Thomas W. Bicknell acknowledged the impossibility to determining essential origins, settling instead for a rendering of social relationships ever partial and incomplete but indicative of social relatedness. Bicknell wrote, “A family genealogy is a bit of the infinite in terms of the finite.” It “gives identity and personality to scattered forces and makes the interlinking of lives more real, natural and helpful.” The genealogy, according to Bicknell, illustrated that a “common name, peculiar physical, mental, and spiritual characteristics unite a few thousands in relations of mutual acquaintance, fellowship, brotherhood, love.” The genealogy, suggested Bicknell, oriented a family member in ever larger spheres of relatedness. “The family, called your name, is one of the units of a national, a world life; the ends it serves are to cement a closer brotherhood and to foster true sympathy, co-operation and faith.”<sup>2</sup> The notion of genealogy envisioned by Bicknell includes seeing oneself as part of a larger imagined community of commitment and empathy that does not rely on face-to-face contact but is constitutive of self.

It can be provisionally concluded from the inquiry that genealogy and family history animated by the genealogical assumption may serve the function of “grounding” even when the constructed nature of the representation of the social bond between ancestors and descendents is apparent and the exact nature of the bond is unclear. Perhaps the genealogical assumption can be deployed strategically in a manner which is not deterministic of self yet contributes the “grounding” necessary for building social bonds based on shared commitments rather than a belief in shared substance.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas W. Bicknell, “Preface,” in *History and Genealogy of the Bicknell Family and Some Collateral Lines of Normandy, Great Britain and America* (Providence, RI: Thomas Williams Bicknell, 1913), iv.

### **Charting Future Direction**

Any inquiry, of course, is limited in scope, and this monograph is hardly a definitive tome on the genealogical assumption. The evidence in this monograph is drawn almost entirely from printed and published discourse – as opposed to Internet discussions boards or the growing array of genealogy oriented television programming – and the cases addressed represent only a portion of the social and cultural spaces where genealogy and family history come into play. While the research for this monograph was based on evidence drawn from genealogy discourse produced by popular and academic journals, “how-to” books, representations of ancestral knowledge, among other things, fictional works, iconography, or published family histories were not considered. Oppositional voices, e.g. anti-genealogy arguments, should be investigated to understand the genealogical assumption from another angle.

Further investigation of the genealogical assumption might also consider additional groups of people interested in genealogy and family history but who as groups did not experience “ruptures” of collective memory as severe as African and Jewish Americans. These could include, for example, many white ethnic groups or other minority groups, such as Latinos, for whom a substantial paper trail linking them to ancestors may exist. Also, it would be beneficial to examine the role played by commercial genealogy services, such as Ancestry.com, and the antiquarian and professional genealogy tradition in the production of genealogy discourse and formations of the genealogical assumption.

It would be extremely useful to consider the degree to which the genealogical assumption was used to articulate the significance of genealogy and family history by

actual genealogy practitioners. For historical cases, evidence may be found in memoirs or published family histories. An ethnographic research component could be used to address contemporary genealogists and family history researchers.

Finally, a comparative perspective might further problematize the genealogical assumption by drawing contrasts with formations of the assumption outside the United States. British genealogy discourse could provide a solid starting point for comparative analysis, considering that genealogy has been a topic of scholarly interest among British cultural geographers; that one of the earliest genetic genealogy companies – Oxford Ancestors – is based in Great Britain; and that NBC’s *Who Do You Think You Are?* was modeled on a British program of the same name. It would be beneficial to extend the analysis of Jewish and Mormon genealogy discourse to a global context, asking if Jewish and Mormon peoplehood is conceived in similar ways outside the United States and if genealogy is used in comparable ways. The inquiry investigated the genealogical assumption in multiple historical contexts in the United States, but comparing expressions of the genealogical assumption across national and ethnic groups could further highlight when and how the genealogical assumption is employed to make sense of membership or exclusion, etc. For example, in the United States, interest in ancestry grew during periods of social and cultural turmoil, i.e. industrialization and immigration during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and a collapse of cultural “consensus” and confidence following the splintering of the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, and Watergate. When does ancestry become significant in other cultural contexts?

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