

Genealogy as Social Memory: Making the Public Personal

“Race, like nature and sex, is replete with all the rituals of guilt and innocence in the stories of nation, family, and species. Race, like nature, is about roots, pollution, and origins. An inherently dubious notion, race, like sex, is about the purity of lineage; the legitimacy of passage; and the drama of inheritance of bodies, property, and stories” (Haraway 1995, p. 213).

In May 2002, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation which runs Monticello and is comprised of the descendants of Thomas and Martha Jefferson voted to deny membership and associated burial rights to the descendants of Sally Hemings—a slave who appears to have had children by Thomas Jefferson (*San Francisco Chronicle*, May 12, 2002, p. D4). This decision was somewhat surprising because in 1998 genetic tests appeared to confirm what Hemings’ relatives had claimed through oral history for years—that at least one, if not all, of Sally Hemings’ children had descended from Thomas Jefferson. Still, the white descendants concluded that the historical and scientific evidence was “insufficient.”

What does this ongoing conflict reveal about the meanings associated with genealogy or the tracing of family ancestry? Numerous fields of meaning converge in the doing of genealogy—from interpretive and scientific methodologies to new technologies to spiritual beliefs—yet how families are constituted and who constitutes family are core. Genealogy ostensibly rests on a biological foundation of procreation, with DNA being the most recent tool for assessing such relations. Still, Edwards and Strathern (2000) insist that the distinction between the social and biological is a relative phenomenon; it not a distinction of all times and places, but has been particular to Western thought. Further, they argue that “the divide (between biological and social kinship) is also a

combination or association (of disparate elements), and belongs to a whole range of possibilities for inclusion and exclusion of persons” (2000; p.150). In sum, doing genealogy necessarily entails constructing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Who is part of a family and who is not? Whose version of the family tree prevails? Rather than accede to and reproduce the social/biological divide, Edwards and Strathern advocate the “power of imagining their intersection.” I would add, that it is at the intersection that we most easily perceive how power sustains the divide.

The anthropologist Bouquet observes: “While the genealogical method seems to separate the biological from the social and cultural constructions of kinship [it has been] anything but [a] neutral instrument” (p. 187). Interestingly, in the Jefferson-Hemings debates, white descendants are primarily relying on the socio-legal framework and the associated documentation that has served to construct racial and familial categories in the formative years of this nation. For example, birth and marriage certificates are, by definition, granted more legitimacy than oral traditions, and more easily procured and stored by elite whites. Moreover, in spite of resistance (Gutman 1983), Europeans severely constrained African slaves from sustaining or establishing family relations. Miscegenation or the mixing of the races—though recognized in early census and state categories—was framed as “unnatural.”¹ Interracial marriage was widely illegal.² In sum, documentation or the lack thereof, more easily produces the visibility versus the erasure of relationships. Indeed, this partially explains why it falls upon African

¹ Terms of distinction like “mulatto” or “quadroon” had been recognized and appropriated during slavery but fell into disuse as the one drop rule replaced the institution of slavery in fixing racial bounded hierarchies and whites secured borders with violence (Washington 2000, cited by DaCosta 2000, p. 61). Also racial borders were secured with the rise of Social Darwinism, and concerns with “racial purity” by “scientists” in the 19th and 20th centuries (Azoulay 1997, p. 94).

² Virginia was the first colony to ban Black and white intermarriage in 1705; even in 1957 30 states had laws against intermarriage—ten years before the Supreme Court overruled state laws against interracial marriage, in the case of *Loving v. Virginia* (Azoulay 1997, p. 90, 95).

American descendants to prove a relationship to Jefferson, rather than it falling upon European American descendants to disprove the Jefferson-Hemings connection. Such asymmetry is a clue to power, and exposes how genealogy is anything but a neutral instrument. Still, it is not just an instrument of power; it is also a practice that is deeply meaningful to those who practice it. What cultural meanings are affirmed or transformed about family heritage by doing genealogy? What boundaries are sustained and/or challenged in the process of this practice? And how are revelations of social memory made personal?

Research Literature:

Genealogy has a long history—indeed the Bible’s first 10 chapters of Genesis represent one familiar and early expression of “genealogical thinking” that took root in the West (Bouquet 2000, p. 174).³ The anthropologist Bouquet argues that visual representation, in other words, the genealogical diagram developed in the early 20th century, has been crucial for constituting kin and that the genealogical method in anthropology “fixed birth as the defining moment of kinship” in the West (2000, p. 186-7). Bouquet goes on to suggest that the diagram or “visualization undoubtedly facilitated winnowing the social from the biological in kinship studies, and holding the biological

³ I use the “West” here as Bouquet (2000) does, however, it is important to recognize that there are early links to Middle Eastern thought—certainly all the Abrahamic religions constructed genealogy as central to family, religion, and national identities. Delaney argues that Genesis—and in particular the Abraham story—was not only about launching monotheism, but also monogenetics—that these were correlative constructions. While there is a difference in scale, “both have to do with origins, or with notions of coming-into-being more generally. Men became symbolically allied with God the Creator, while women became symbolically associated with what was created—namely, the earth. The very notion of paternity, therefore, already embodied *authority* and power. Creative power *is* divinity. Human (pro)creative power was bestowed by God to Adam, the first man. It is Adam, not Eve, who begat; all men have the power, and it is through men that the divine spark of life flows.” (2001, p. 454-5). While there are certainly other ways of constituting relations and social memory (Zerubavel 2003), there may also be many types of genealogical thinking. Thanks to Jim Wilce for bringing this point to my attention. Given the traditions of ancestor worship in many Eastern cultures and the origin stories of Indigenous peoples, more universalistic claims seem compelling; however, the diversity in meanings and transformations of genealogical stories over time, suggest that universalizing may conceal as much as it reveals.

referent steady” (p. 187). American rules for ascertaining biological relations depend, first of all, on how procreation is linked to family; as Schneider (1968, 1980) has argued, sexual intercourse symbolically links the domain of blood relations to the domain of legal relations—specifically marriage. Of course, marriage has never been required for procreation—and now sexual intercourse isn’t either.⁴ Beyond rules for determining marital and parental relations, genealogical practice relies on rules associated with historical, legal and social science research. Documentation necessitates triangulating data, or finding more than one certificate or document (usually three) to legitimate a relationship. To follow these rules, one can claim ancestors as one’s own. Speaking about anthropological genealogists, Bouquet suggests: “Genealogical collection is one of the ways we do indeed bring kinship, as an object of relations, back home with us” (p. 186). Similarly, it would seem, the individual who time travels via stories, census records, property records and birth certificates, locate and position their relatives in visual diagrams—from circle charts to forking tree charts—to bring them back home with them.

Indeed, the genealogical diagram has become a tool used as much by everyday folk as by anthropologists; today we witness millions of individuals tracing their “roots.” This interest has been fueled by the tools of the internet—including databases and discussion lists—and software programs that assist individuals with organizing the construction of their “family trees.” The genealogical websites are among the most frequented sites on the net—second only to pornography sites (Auslander 2001)—and the number of associations, and their memberships, continue to grow (Worchel 1999).

Although this activity would seem to be personal, I will suggest it is profoundly social.

⁴ The literature on alternative reproductive technologies has proliferated and revealed the ways that we use and dismiss biology in our constructions of relations. See, for example, Edwards, Franklin, Hirsch, Price and Strathern 1999; Franklin 2001; Ragone and Twine 2000; Ragone 1997; Rapp 1990; Thompson, 2001.

I come to this research as a family sociologist, interested in what it means to construct lineal relations through genealogy. To the best of my knowledge, there is very little current sociological research that is investigating the meaning of genealogical activity (Erben 1991; Lucich 1996; Vladimirovna 1998; Wilson 1997; Zerubavel, 2003). An exception is the cognitive sociologist Zerubavel (2003), who has been analyzing how the genealogical way of thinking as a classification system is a construct that measures social proximity and distance as well as a symbolic vehicle for constituting social, and not just personal memory. Beyond targeting genealogy, there are at least three areas of literature in sociology relevant to understanding the meaning and practice of genealogy—racial-ethnic studies, family studies, cultural sociology—and there is some notable work emerging in the field of anthropology.

First, within sociology there is a large and growing literature on the formation of racial/ethnic identities, relations, and the accompanying constructions of inequalities (e.g. Azoulay 1997; Brah and Coombes 2000; Collins 2000; DaCosta 2000; Haraway 1995; Nagel 1994; Omi and Winant 1994; Pedraza and Rumbaut 1996; Song 2001; Waters 1990; Worchel 1999). Given that race, ethnicity, and nationality organize many genealogical associations, clearly, race and ethnicity are constructed in the process of doing genealogy. Although ‘race’ as a biological construction has been widely rejected, it is no less real for being a social construction. As many scholars have shown, racial-ethnic constructions must be sustained, and are neither invariant nor universal.⁵

Ethnoracial identities are sustained through various practices, policies, and institutions—

⁵ For example: “A person who is one-eighth black is ‘white’ in Jamaica, ‘black’ in Louisiana. Trinidadians and Belizeans, who come from countries a thousand miles apart and regard themselves as having little in common, become ethnically lumped as ‘West Indians’ when they immigrate to Britain, just as the derogatory term ‘Pakis’ is applied by British racists to Hindu Indians, Muslim Pakistanis, and any other South Asians who happen to be around” (Griswold 1994, p. 107).

including families. Because interracial relations have been taboo, we still assume and to a large degree produce families that appear monoracial (Da Costa 2000). Intermarriage has grown substantially in recent decades—there were ten times as many couples categorized as interracial in 1990 as had been the case in 1960; still, in 1990 interracial marriages were just three percent of all marriages in the United States (DaCosta 2000, p. 9-10). By 2000, six percent of marriage households were interracial (Simmons and O’Connell 2003).⁶ The practices of adoption agencies and sperm banks often, if not always, produce monoracial families as well. In short, ethnoracial identities continue to be crucial to family constructions.

Second, within sociology there is the large literature that examines families present and past. Family historians demonstrate the ways that family rituals and practices have changed in meaning over time (Coontz 1992, 1997; Fass 1993; Gillis 1996; Pleck 2000). Family sociologists have increasingly attended to the meanings that family members construct today through their practices (Beck-Gernsheim 1998; Bellah et al., 1985; Burton and Stack 1992; Daly 2003; Devault 1991; Garey 1999; Hackstaff 1999; Hays 1996; Hochschild 1989, 1997; Knowles 1996; Riessman 1990; Swidler 2001; Twine 1997; Weston 1991). And, what constitutes family—issues of inclusion and exclusion—has been increasingly contested in contemporary U.S. society where we debate whether gay couples can legally marry, who is the ‘real’ mother when egg, the womb, and the adoptive mother are three different women, whether adoptive records should be open or not, and whether divorced, blended, unmarried, gay, and step parenthood deserve support and legitimacy (Stacey 1990). These debates about family

⁶ It is important to note that significant changes took place in the ways of defining racial-ethnic identities in the 2000 Census, thus the comparability with 1990 data and before is unclear.

structures are often discussed in terms of family values and presume that family formations were more uniform in the past. Yet, genealogy may suggest otherwise.

Like sociology, anthropology has a long-standing tradition of studying families, under the rubric of kinship (Malinowski 1913; Levi-Strauss 1969; Schneider 1968). Anthropologists have increasingly turned their attention to United States families, particularly as they reflexively reformulate a discipline that has justified western hegemony (Burton and Stack 1993; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Edwards and Strathern 2000; Gailey 2000; Ragone 1997). Indeed, some anthropologists argue that the notion of 'kinship' is too laden with Western bias and circumscribed associations and that it is preferable to talk of "relatedness" (Carsten 2000). Significantly, anthropologists have begun to examine the meaning and practice of genealogy itself. (Auslander 2001, 2002; Bouquet 2000; Delaney 2001; Edwards and Strathern 2000; Franklin 2001; Helmreich 2001; Segalen 2001; Shore 2002; Yan 2001). And, of course, anthropologists have long been attuned to the centrality of "culture" in social relations (e.g. Benedict 1934; Mead 1923; Geertz 1973).

A final sociological arena of relevance to analyzing genealogical practice is cultural sociology. While anchored in founding sociologists' work (e.g. Durkheim 1915/1965; Weber 1905/1958), cultural sociology is an analytic area in sociology that has recently coalesced as sociologists have become increasingly frustrated with relatively limited explanatory models that seemed to either over- or underemphasize the power of culture. Culture can be understood most generally as "processes of meaning-making" (Spillman 2002 p. 2). Cultural sociologists employ a variety of theoretical approaches that attend to different levels of analysis and often work to link them (Crane 1994;

Griswold 1994; Long 1997; Spillman 2002). Still, most authors stress that cultural forms are at least as central to social relations as are economic structures—that is, such forms constitute power relations (Bourdieu 1984; Foucault 1978). Religious and spiritual meanings that inform people's conceptions of ancestors, lineage and origin stories remain central too (Christiano 2000; Delaney 2001; Yan 2001). In sum, studies in race-ethnicity, families and kinship, and cultural sociology provide the theoretical backdrop for examining the meaning of doing genealogy for our society and individual practitioners.

Research Method

I am interested in how people's narratives generate meanings and constitute relationships. My aim is to elicit narratives from individuals to understand how they realize and forge family identities. Therefore, this research is based partially upon in-depth interviews. I have relied upon snowball sampling (with no more than three links from any one reference), and by joining genealogical associations and interviewing member of those organizations. The interviews have averaged three hours each. I have also conducted at least five informal interviews, generally while hanging out at genealogical libraries. While I also intend to sample interactions on the web, so far, I have conducted 11 in-depth interviews.

At this point in the research process my sample can be described as primarily middle class, between the ages of 48 and 80 years, and practicing genealogy for as little as two to as many as 25 years. Nine respondents are women and two are men. Six respondents self-identify as European American, four identify as African American and one identifies variously as African American, European American and as multiracial. Family structures are less easy to describe briefly; however, among the 11 respondents,

10 have had children and all have been married at some point, though only four are currently married to their first spouse. One person is currently widowed and six have been divorced; among the six divorced individuals, one has remarried, one has re-partnered and four remained single.

In order to tap the meaning of genealogy in their lives, I asked about the stories in their research that have been meaningful to them, about secrets and silences, about their views on DNA, and about their current family lives and religious beliefs. I began by asking respondents to discuss when they began doing genealogy followed by the discussion of why at that particular time. These questions usually resulted in a discussion of motives and meanings. While four thematic areas have emerged in my work thus far, in this paper I discuss two themes: Connecting with History and Epistemological Disconnections.⁷

Connecting With History

Of all the comments that I heard, the notion that family genealogy makes history real was the most frequent. It can be argued that genealogy is the epitome of the sociological imagination. As Mills famously noted decades ago:

Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both...The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. (1959, p. 8)

Although historians might scoff at some genealogists, most of my interviewees (9 out of 11) were exceedingly careful about their claims and their methods.

⁷ The other two themes are Connecting With the Living which focuses on family reunions and how relations are forged with virtual strangers and long lost kin and Connecting With the Dead, which focuses on the spiritual and religious elements of doing genealogy.

While a few people said they had *always* liked history, more said that they hated history until they started doing genealogy. Family biography brought history to life. Respondents learned how ancestors' lives had intersected with, produced, and responded to historical events. Abby's (54 year old, European American) account is typical:

And to be a good genealogist you have to learn so much, so many different skills, you have to understand history, and politics, and geography, and social customs. If you're gonna make a good guess about what happened to somebody, you better know where people in this area migrated to...and you need to know about, you know, what age did women get married? [...] If you're going to make educated guesses you have to know for that region and for that time and you have to know that kind of stuff in order to know what records to look for. You have to know could women own property? You know. You have to know how did someone get naturalized in the old days. There was no INS. You know, how did you do it? And what were the rules then?

Abby concluded: "I was never interested in history, but now it's totally different."

Fascination with genealogy and history is undoubtedly related to the unique phenomenon of Roots, the 1974 book authored by Alex Haley.⁸ Based on his genealogy, the book was a best seller and one of the most "widely read books of the last 30 years"; further, "[o]ne hundred thirty million people in the United States and millions others throughout the world watched the television dramatization of this book" first broadcast in 1977 (Worchel 1999, p. 22). Ten of my participants mentioned the book or the series, and several respondents mentioned the series as initially motivating them to do genealogy. Yet to claim genealogy has become popular because of Haley's text doesn't answer a more fundamental question, suggested by Auslander (2002, p. 7): "Why, after all, were these texts so enormously popular at a particular moment?" Why did this

⁸ Based on Haley's genealogical practice, the book constructs a narrative that begins with Kunte Kinte—an African captured and enslaved by Europeans—but whose life and the life of his descendants is ultimately a story of struggle, triumph and freedom. Probably no other public event promoted genealogy more than its publication and the subsequent 13-part television series of Roots—particularly for the now aging baby boom generation, which constitute most of my sample.

cultural event become so broadly and deeply meaningful? Roots spoke to everyone—regardless of race or ethnicity. Indeed, as many white as black respondents mentioned how Roots sparked their interest.

Schudson (1989) argues that the power of any cultural object to influence individuals or groups can be evaluated in five ways, and three are clearly relevant here.⁹ First, Roots was a cultural object that was socially and economically accessible and available to all (retrievable in Schudson's terms), particularly when transferred from book to video. Second, Roots had enormous "rhetorical force"; it was a narrative that departed from, yet related to, earlier narratives of American beginnings. This was a narrative wherein Africans' subjection, subordination, and enslavement are recounted, yet Africans were not reduced to two-dimensional objects constructed from a white standpoint. Haley's characters are fully acting subjects empowered to shape their destiny in spite of cruelty and constraint. It is transparent why the African American community would embrace such fully human portraits, but perhaps less why Roots has had 'universal' appeal to non-African American communities. At the least, people can identify with three-dimensional human beings; they cannot identify with caricatures.

Third, Roots had the power to resonate with its large and diverse audience in multiple ways. The emotions evoked by the series—loss, grief, reunion, joy and love—and the notion of families enduring through time are meaningful to us all. Yet Schudson emphasizes that resonance means connecting not simply to individual interests, but "to

⁹ In "How Culture Works" Schudson (1989) suggests that the power of any cultural object to influence individuals or groups can be evaluated in five ways: in terms of its retrievability (economically and socially available), rhetorical force (how a cultural object departs from and is related to other objects in the field), resonance (not just to individual audience members, but "how culture connects to interests that are themselves constituted in a cultural frame"), institutional retention (e.g. degree institutionalized in social, educational, economic systems and are sanctions for its disregard), and resolution (degree to which text or object is also a directive for action).

cultural interests that are themselves constituted by cultural frames” (1989 p. 145). I would submit that these cultural interests are the unfinished work of our society; we still struggle with the contradiction between the freedom and equality promised upon our nation’s birth and the enslavement, violence and inequality that were its foundation. This contradiction between our ideals and reality is still with us, if in new guise. To repair divisions, we have alternatively ignored, used, or naturalized them. Thus, for example, the history of slavery in this country is a story of conflict over the processes of exclusion and inclusion and the power required to maintain and challenge both.

Most participants conveyed the idea that genealogy made history *real*: comments that the dead *really* lived or events *really* happened were pervasive characterizations of the effect of doing genealogy. Participants wanted to show me photographs of ancestors, gravestones, and houses, certificates of marriage, births recorded in Bibles, and records of the last slave owner on the other side of the 1870 “Brick Wall.” In short, they wanted to make their histories real for me as well. One interviewee showed me a lock of hair that had been an ancestor’s (Clarissa), others described walking on the land that had once been their ancestors’ land (Heather, James), and still another described how she wept upon seeing the signature of a paternal grandfather who had eluded her research (Katie).

What are the implications of making family history “real”?

Doing family history provided a sense of connectedness and belonging—enlarging many respondents’ families and communities quite literally. Given the substantial changes in family lives in the last three decades—recorded in the statistical stories of divorce, single parenthood, and working families—are genealogists seeking stability? As many scholars have pointed out, a postmodern era of ceaseless change,

fluidity and fragmentation seems to foster nostalgia for a past when identities were anchored to communities and community to a place, and families, as many imagine, were more reliable, stable, and unified (Harvey 1989; Skolnick 1991). For example, Auslander (2002) argues that the “mass explosion” of interest in genealogy since the 1970s may be traced to the changing structures and functions of families, such that a ‘cultural imaginary’ that transcends individual experience and symbolizes unity, sameness, and continuity is crucial as families have become increasingly discontinuous, tenuous, fragile, and shorn of material interdependence.

Speaking of a desire for historical continuity in a context of flux, Harvey argues (1989, p. 303):

The irony is that tradition is now often preserved by being commodified and marketed as such. The search for roots ends up at worst being produced and marketed as an image, as a simulacrum or pastiche [...] The photograph, the document, the view, and reproduction become history precisely because they are so overwhelmingly present. [...] Through the presentation of a partially illusory past it becomes possible to signify something of local identity and perhaps to do it profitably.

While profits are certainly being made in the genealogical industry, and while past families are being romanticized, it is still the case that respondents’ longing for belonging speaks to disruptions in our families today. In our “search for secure moorings in a shifting world,” (Harvey 1989, p. 302), perhaps genealogical charts provide a sense of constancy. Yet, nostalgia may be too simple an explanation for why genealogy has become salient in family lives. For the committed genealogist, it does not take long to learn about the disruptions, fragmentations, and the family secrets and silences that attended family lives in the past. Only one interviewee said he was not motivated by secrets and mysteries in the doing of genealogy. Most were. And subsequent

‘discoveries’ tend to challenge nostalgia notions of families past. Furthermore, nostalgia for families and times past does not carry the same meaning for European Americans and African Americans.

Nostalgia for an earlier era among European Americans can disguise nostalgia for greater privilege in an earlier American era—an unlikely longing among African Americans.¹⁰ European American respondents were fascinated by histories that they had not learned about in school. In contrast, African Americans explicitly critiqued educational institutions treatment of ‘history’—the silences and distortions. Essentially I heard of desires to re-tell history. Eve, for example, notes: “The way it was taught to me in school, I didn’t believe it anyway.” She elaborates, saying: “You’re really finding yourself getting into these books and the history to see...but then you have to be careful whose perspective you’re using.” And as Iris describes her desire to incorporate more story telling and genealogy at family reunions, she explains: “Part of our issue right now is that we do not have a written history. Everything that’s about us has been written by someone else, so it doesn’t really reflect us, you know.”

Eve and Iris are attuned to the constructiveness of history and the power associated with who gets to construct history. Roots represented a new perspective on our history as Americans as well as a history that focused upon the African American experience as told by an African American. Needless to say, Haley’s accounts and methods have been challenged. Epistemological power struggles are necessarily embedded in the methodology of genealogy. Yet how do we ascertain the real?

¹⁰ While privilege may not be a salient longing for African American genealogists, a longing for how things might have been does emerge in some narratives, such as “The Language You Cry In: The story of a Mende song.” This 1999 video reveals how a song since the 18th century stores social memories and becomes a crucial link for family relations.

Epistemological Disconnections

How we recognize the “reality” of social and family relations is both a substantive and methodological issue. Our rules for kinship are anchored in marriage and procreation. Even as genealogy uses marriage to trace relations, the emphasis is upon procreative or lineal relations.¹¹ Although “blood” retains its power as a metaphor for family relatedness, DNA has become at least as powerful. Its power is not just hypothetical; one woman made the news who was able to trace her ancestry back to Ghana, specifically the Akuapim people—triangulating DNA data with family linguistic practices and a slave trader’s journal.¹² Among my respondents, the metaphors of blood and DNA symbolized family relations regardless of marital legitimacy. Thus, biology is often perceived as “real” regardless of what culture has to say. Most respondents saw new DNA technologies as a valuable tool for genealogy—only two said that they were not especially interested in the technology. Several intend to take swabs from family members in the hope that it will be useful for themselves or perhaps succeeding generations. Blood or DNA relations are seen as the stuff of reality—a reality that can only be discovered and not created. Yet respondents’ epistemological approaches to constituting family relations were more complicated.

On the one hand, most serious genealogists are positivists in their practice. In general, genealogists assume that there is a reality; facts like DNA are independent of theories or values about them and can be tapped using neutral, objective, and value-free methods. Upon searching for a “Thomas Green,” for example, they know better than to assume that they have found him if such a name appears on a Census record. The name

¹¹ Auslander provides an illuminating contrast between the rituals of weddings and family reunions as two cultural practices that respectively emphasize marital or conjugal versus parental or lineal relations.

¹² Pearl Duncan’s story can be found in “The New York Times,” Tuesday, 2/2/6-02, p. A23.

may have been common, of course, but names also changed over time—and as most genealogists discover, spelling was not a forte of census takers, among others. Given such changes, a name can only be a clue and not a determinant of ethnic or family relations. A household with a “Thomas Green” accompanied by children with names that have been documented in other ways, however, is more promising. Thus, genealogists follow a rule that three sources of documentation are essential to establish a relationship; they use documentation to confirm the stories heard from, for example, a great aunt who “is accurate; she doesn’t change stories” (Dora, 56-year-old European American) or a grandmother who gets “everything accurate” (Heather, 48-year-old Multiracial American).

On the other hand, many genealogists recognize the constructiveness of history and reality. At one point Frances observes speaking of history: “We take from it what we want to and use it for what we want.” We’ve already seen how Iris and Eve are fully aware that whose perspective is telling history matters—that there is no disinterested standpoint in historical accounts. Also, several respondents—Clarissa, Eve, Dora, Iris—complained about the limitations of software programs that prevent recording family relations outside the frame of legal, heterosexual, reproductive relations. And such family forms are often rigidly embedded in genealogical software.¹³ While other programs are beginning to add flexibility to genealogical charting—in fact, Abby is working to develop a software program that is more inclusive—the symbolic nuclear family form still tends to override and marginalize the multiple family formations that

¹³ For example, a commonly used software program because one can download it for free off the Latter Day Saints’ website, does not allow one to enter two women or two men in a family chart; that is, the program requires a man and a woman. This rigidity is a bit odd given the history of polygamy in Mormon families.

actually existed and currently exist. In these ways, genealogists are fully cognizant of the relative construction of family in social and historical contexts.

Contradictions emerge between documenting procreative relations within marital unions that are accorded legitimacy in the genealogical frame, and tracing family relations that are outside of such a frame. Adoption is an interesting case because biological relations are generally perceived as more real and as constituting family relations, though we legally recognize adoption (Gailey 2000). The adopted who do pursue their genetic parents, often do so as much out of “a desire for memory and continuity” as a desire for medical histories (Finkler 2000 p.171). When asked if other family members appreciate her genealogical endeavors, Dora mentions with some irony a cousin “who is adopted, but the most interested” in her findings. The irony is an implicit recognition that genealogy is above all rooted in biological links—yet social relations and memory trump biology for this cousin.

When Katie is asked if she has noticed any patterns in her family over time, she reports that not only was she adopted, but that two of her children had adopted children—and that she has offered to trace her grandchildren’s “real” family lines should an interest develop. The word “real” accords biological relations an ontological status denied to the adopted relation (Ragone 1997). Still, legitimacy is accorded family related by care, rather than by blood. Katie does not assume relations with caretakers are threatened by a biological link. She berates those who would hide medical information from progeny they give up for adoption. And, speaking of her bio-father, Katie stated: “I never fully accepted him as my father.” Katie is comfortable with this seeming contradiction between the biological and social facets of family, perhaps in fact, trying to engage the

“power of imagining their intersection” (Edwards and Strathern 2000, p. 150). Indeed, the doing of genealogy reveals how American kinship is a system that relies upon social and biological constructions to link *and* to limit each other.

Both [biological and social relations] afford perspectives from which kinship can be claimed, and the one may either lead to or be played off against the other. Limits are set by how far one wishes to claim –or own, or own up to—such connections. (Edwards and Strathern 2000, p. 159)

As an only child, Katie uses biological links to enlarge her family in the doing of genealogy—even as she disclaims relations with her bio-father and a half-sister (both of whom she never lived with and only learned existed when she was nine years old). This dual system of constituting family empowers individuals to enlarge and to limit family relations. Katie also grapples with the constructiveness of inclusion and exclusion when just who constitutes family intersects with racial formations.

When Katie is asked about her views on “reparations” for the enslavement of African Americans, she explains: “Even now I get very, very tearful. The reality is that human beings were sold with the pots and the pans and the dishes.” Katie’s tears upon seeing ancestors in a property inventory lubricate her desire to reveal and repair the historic suppression of inequalities that inform her racial and familial histories. This reality is apparent to every African American doing genealogy. The primary way to trace ancestry through slavery, before the 1870 “Brick Wall” is to research European American’s wills, taxes, and property records. Although there is no concurrence within the African American genealogical association from which I drew respondents, Katie believes that reparations are a good idea.¹⁴

¹⁴ She feels that reparations should “level the playing field,” “should be in the form of education, health care” (rather than individual reparations) and should include a straightforward apology by the government.

And that's me, because it was just too unfair I think. And everybody doesn't feel the way I do. And to name names, that would just be unfair. But yeah, some people just don't want to discuss it. That happened and so...it makes me mad. Or, get over it. Or, it's too painful. But to me, it's what is. And it's *very real*. And life becomes even more valuable because I said, any time a seed of mine crossed the Middle Passage, then I must be made out of some good stuff. You know. My husband's always saying, yeah but what about your white side? I go...he's still hiding, remember [KH: he's being elusive] He's still being elusive. I'll get to him.

Indeed, this maternal grandfather remains elusive because he had 'passed' into the white community and as such rarely appeared in the life of her mother. As Katie, among other Black respondents recognize, they are often white too. Yet a central identity as African American derives from the extended legacy of the one-drop rule in this country—the idea that any amount of African American ancestry makes one Black rather than White. Hand in hand with anti-miscegenation laws, the rule created appearances that in turn influenced treatments and interactions in everyday experience that, in turn, make the distinctions seem natural. DaCosta observes:

While estimates vary, scholars generally agree that by the 1920s and certainly by the 1930s, the one drop principle had gained social and legal acceptance by both whites and blacks—the very people it was developed to exclude, exploit and oppress (Davis 1991). The legacy of the imposition of the one-drop rule is the pervasive impact it has on the racial common sense—the “forgetting” that this construction of race is not natural but arbitrary, only one historical possibility among many. Moreover, the idea is so taken for granted, so embedded in American life—from census enumeration to legal decisions to social custom—that attempts to change it are not only difficult, but visit on their advocates accusations that they are indeed crazy. (2000, p. 62)¹⁵

¹⁵As Worchel (1999, p. 39) documents, the Virginia Code 1-14 declared: “Every person in whom there is ascertainable any Negro blood shall be deemed and taken to be a colored person, and every person not a colored person having one-fourth or more of American Indian blood shall be deemed an American Indian; except that members of Indian tribes existing in this Commonwealth having one-fourth or more Indian blood and less than one-sixteenth of Negro blood shall be deemed tribal Indians.’ This concern about ‘blood’ was carried to an extreme when Louisiana required that a white patient be notified if a black person’s blood was ‘all that could be found for transfusion and that he be given an opportunity to refuse it’ (Sickels 1972).”

One of the conundrums of talking about race is that even for those “crazy” few who challenge its construction, they must talk as if it is “real.”

Heather wondered if her interest in genealogy might be due to the fact that the dead cannot reject her unlike the living—rejections that she clearly experienced through her estrangement from a loved cousin and two divorces. Yet, Heather also has experienced rejection by various genealogical and other communities. In the course of talking about her multiracial heritage, she notes:

I was very active in all this—the anti-war movement, Viet Nam, the Civil war [sic] movements the Black Panthers, the nation of Islam, all that stuff. To be able to openly embrace my white heritage has been a big step and--I've been ostracized by black folks as a result.

She was also a member of the Pocahontas society with whom she interacted on the web; when they found out she was Black too, she was “thrown out” of the society. She hasn't told the online Scottish society of this facet of her identity because one “can have the door slammed in your face if they know you are black.” Heather also describes what occurs when conversing with those of Irish heritage and she asks what part of Ireland that their ancestors come from:

And they'll say oh County Claire, or County Tipperary, so “oh my great grandmother was from County Cork” and you see the look, and I'm yeah, yeah, my great grandfather...and you can hear all the questions in their mind...

In sum, even as her aim is to include, to embrace all parts of her heritage—no small feat when one can conjecture that a white ancestor might be a rapist, or perhaps an ‘illegitimate’ lover—she confronts the exclusionary uses of genealogy. She challenges the “one-drop rule,” as her identity shifts in relation to African American, American Indian, and Irish American contexts, suggesting that European Americans are not the only ones with “ethnic options”—though they may be more limited (Song 2001).

Clearly, inclusion and exclusion within families are not entirely up to individuals—but depend upon social contexts and historical formations that still shape our current lives. Not only is the Western idiom of kinship reliant upon biology and culture to establish relations distinctive to Anglo American traditions,¹⁶ but the naturalization or essentializing of racial and ethnic identities enables and prevents the degrees of freedom individuals experience to constitute family. This is an intersection of biology and culture where we most easily perceive how power sustains the divide. Bourdieu (1984) conceptualizes such processes as “classification struggles.” His work emphasizes how symbolic systems, structured as binary classification systems of inclusion and exclusion, “not only provide cognitive and integrative functions but also serve as instruments of domination” (Swartz 1997, p. 83). Such processes of “cultural classification” can be observed across all group formations, including class, age, relations, races, ethnicities, sexualities, and families (DaCosta 2000). He states:

[The] principles of division, inextricably logical and sociological, function within and for the purposes of the struggle between social groups; in producing concepts, they produce groups, the very groups which produce the principles and the groups against which they are produced. What is at stake in the struggles about the meaning of the social world is power over classificatory schemes and systems which are the basis of the representations of the groups and therefore of their mobilization and demobilization. (Bourdieu 1984, p. 479).

DaCosta (2000) applies the notion of classification struggle to racialized families. She notes that the racial classification system relies upon family ancestry—that one’s race is simply how one’s ancestors were classified, which of course was relative to social constructions of the day. She argues that the reproduction of monoracial families

¹⁶ The anthropological collection of articles in *Cultures of Relatedness*, edited by Janet Carsten, analyzes a variety of cross-cultural systems for constituting kin, some of which do not rely upon biological constructs for constituting kin, do not conceive of biology and culture as dichotomous, and use very different social rules for created “relatedness.”

achieved in part by enforced, and later internalized, marrying patterns generates two key processes. First, there is the *familization* of race, whereby we conceive of a race as one big family. Second, there is the *racialization* of families, whereby we think of families as being of one race; this assumption is well known to multiracial families—such as white mothers of black children or black mothers of white children, the latter a conceptual contradiction given the one drop rule (Twine 2000). Both of these cultural processes speak to why it is so difficult for the white Jefferson's to recognize their Black cousins. Yet such naturalization of identities cannot be adequately addressed, unless and until we acknowledge how power is deployed and inequality sustained through such categorical arrangements.

Conclusion

Beyond Schneider's (1967) recognition that biology is a symbolic cultural system that is used to constitute family relations, scholars have recently elucidated how “naturalizing” works to produce inequalities (Franklin 2001; Strathern 1992). When naturalized construction of races are combined with families—one of our categories that is most resistant to being understood in terms of social construction—a secure symbolic border has been fortified. It is not a border or a distinction of mere difference, but maintains inequality. One indicator of such inequality is who accepts whom. Just as men are more resistant to reconstruct gender by taking on feminine qualities that are less valued in our society (in contrast to women taking on valued masculine qualities), so too, European Americans like the Monticello society are more resistant to letting go of lineage-based identities that mark their privilege. By maintaining distinctions, they (we) continue to naturalize race. The racialization of families is an effect of past power

struggles—the laws, customs and violence that supported such racial formations. Although we depend less on law and physical violence, we continue to fabricate racialized families via symbolic violence and seemingly benign cultural practices today. Genealogy would seem to reproduce the very distinctions that have created inequality—the racial/ethnic bases of genealogical associations, the different methods required for research for different groups, as well as enduring conflicts about what families and races are or should be suggest as much and are exemplified in the Jefferson-Hemings conflict. Like many racial-ethnic conflicts reveal, social memories of oppression are long; indeed one reason reparations has emerged again is that there has never been adequate recognition of African Americans contributions to this country's foundation. In sum, genealogy can serve as to remind us of our repressed histories, particularly in American culture, where historical amnesia thrives by privileging the present or future over the past and where the veneration of the individual's ability to forge a life—seemingly unfettered by identities anchored in families, race, genders, religions, nationalities, or classes—conceals the operation of powers that sustain an illusion of equality.

Additionally, genealogy has potential for denaturalizing families and deconstructing common sense around family and race relations. Doing genealogy often entails dispensing with illusions about who constitutes family and how families were constituted. Clarissa, the only European American to recognize multiracial roots, spoke of her relations in the Caribbean when she noted:

There're all these mulatto and black [family name]...and they're all our's, I know they are. I just haven't been able to figure out quite how the connections...and then they all disappear which I think probably means they all passed into white society. I've actually found a census where a Mr. B. is mulatto and in a census 10 years later he's white. Same guy.

Same town. It occurred to him I guess that this might be better. So he just switched.

Such connections reconstruct social memories and have the potential to stimulate reflexivity. However, reflexivity requires questioning our cultural categories—how they have worked and for whom—rather than allowing variations to become exceptions. The awareness of multiracial heritage is more common among African Americans because they have suffered from the racial hierarchy instituted by white people.¹⁷ Indeed, Clarissa’s language suggests the contradictory nature of this process for Euro-Americans. On the one hand, she expands her circle of familial inclusion; on the other hand, her reference to “they’re all our’s” gives one pause. It not only echoes the “ownership” of slavery, but also reflects Strathern’s claim that possession is a central feature of knowledge itself in Euro-American culture. “People can acquire an identity by discovery because, according to Strathern, ‘knowledge creates relationships; relationships come into being when the knowledge does’” (Strathern 1998 cited in Franklin 2001, p. 306). Franklin proceeds to explain Strathern’s point.

[Such] recontextualization reveals the ways in which bodies, identities, connections, and knowledges are linked through forms of possessive individualism. In contrast to Schneider, it is implicit in Strathern’s argument that all Euro-American knowledge claims are contingent, including biological ones (2001, p. 307).

In short, there are multiple ways that our histories speak *through* us when we grapple with the past. Exclusion and inclusion are simultaneous, relational processes. And, we might expect an uneven advance in social consciousness and social change.

When the Monticello association voted in May of 2002 to exclude the Hemings from membership—to deny their relation to Jefferson—John Works Jr., a former

¹⁷ Phoenix and Owen report: “it has been estimated that 70-80 per cent of all US black people have some white ancestry (Zack 1993), whereas the numbers of whites with black ancestry is less clear” (1996, p. 75).

president of the association, stated: “Our intent was to *kill* this forever so it doesn’t keep coming up again. This should do it.” (San Francisco Chronicle, May 12, 2002, D4, emphasis added). His violent verb and confidence suggest the white Jefferson’s enduring sense of power to define the situation, to construct a reality of racialized family that is oblivious to standpoint, and to privilege social rather than biological distinctions at will. Yet, it also underestimates the meaning and the principle attached to this recognition for the Hemings side of the family. Their genealogic claims are claims for a redistribution of social memory and history.

Doing genealogy cannot be more faithfully characterized as connecting or disconnecting, including or excluding, elevating the social or the biological, promoting individualism or collective meaning. It is all of these. Boundaries are sustained and/or redrawn and inequalities are both challenged and reproduced by doing genealogy. Yet if we take seriously the power of culture, in my view “hobby” seriously underestimates what some family genealogists are doing and readily dismisses its consequences. These perceptions underestimate the social, cultural and political implications of genealogic practice and overlook what may be one of the more important elements of this growing passion: the invigoration of historical reflexivity by the population at large.

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