

Article

# Genealogical Relatedness: Geographies of Shared Descent and Difference

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**Abstract:** This paper explores genealogy through a focus on what I describe as the idea of genealogical relatedness. This is a model of human relations which emphasizes relationships between people defined through the reckoning of connections based on birth and parentage. I offer a geographical analytical framework for exploring both popular genealogy and ideas of genealogical relatedness, shared descent and difference. It is one that both attends to the variety of ways that collective identity is defined or explored through genealogy and is alert to the troubling nature of genealogical categorizations and differentiations especially those which are figured in terms of concepts that seem to be most progressive, including ideas hybridity, diversity, and universal humanity.

**Keywords:** genealogy; kinship; difference; descent

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## 1. The Trouble with Genealogy

In a context in which the genealogy has come to be an enormously popular cultural practice both in terms of personal family history research and interest in the family histories of others on TV, and is increasingly the subject of scholarly interest, it might seem odd to suggest that it is a cause of any kind of “trouble.” However, the trouble I suggest here is twofold. One is the challenge to adequately address the complex, contrasting and multiple dimensions of genealogy, as both a mode of understanding human relationships and social orderings and as a popular practice. This means attending to the historical and geographical contingencies which shape these understandings, orderings and practices and their implications and elucidating what can be generalized about genealogy in this broad sense. My reference to “trouble” here is about “going to the trouble” to develop an analytical framework that fosters careful attention to the complexities of genealogy and provides the conceptual tools to explore the broad and specific effects of genealogical imaginaries and practices on the ways in which individuals and groups understand themselves and their relationships with others.

The second trouble with genealogy is more specific. It is the problem of the model of relatedness that is at the heart of genealogy. Genealogy can be usefully understood as both a description of a set of relationships, as in someone “having a genealogy,” and a practice of researching and recording those relationships. The relationships that constitute genealogy are relationships between people defined through the reckoning of connections based on birth and parentage. The trouble I allude to here, and will address in what follows, is the way in which extended genealogical relationships and shared ancestry have defined and continue to affect categories of collective identity, and the implications of assuming a natural correlation between these genealogical relationships and social and cultural closeness and distance. This is particularly a concern about the continued power idea of the nation as a community of shared descent even if inflected by multicultural discourses of diversity. However, as I will argue in what follows, the trouble of genealogical relatedness is not only a matter of the politics of ethnic nationalism.

Addressing this trouble sensitively and effectively is not easy. This is particularly because of the variety of ways in which genealogy has been mobilized in different historical and geographical

contexts and by different social groups, and across a spectrum of agendas from naturalizing the elite transfer of power and property to the use of genealogy as a radical recovery of historical knowledge by subordinated groups. Furthermore, a critical engagement with genealogical models of collective identity needs to be sensitive to the significance of shared ancestry for many, including immigrant ethnic groups having multiple or diasporic senses of belonging, or indigenous groups for whom genealogical depth has huge political significance in terms of claims to ancestral land. There is a challenge here too in addressing the political implications of a genealogical model of relatedness, while respecting the deeply personal, intimate, and profoundly meaningful nature of the practice for many, such as those exploring genealogy in response to the death of parent or as an adoptee searching for knowledge of their biological parents and family, for example. This effort to work through this trouble is inspired by Donna Haraway's powerful critique of ideas of biological kinship as the basis of social categories and relations [1], her radical refiguring of multi-species kinship [2] and her recent injunction to "stay with the trouble" to make kin between human and non-human life on earth [3].

This paper is an attempt to bring together the key themes that have run through my engagement with genealogy, including genetic genealogy, since I began to address this in the late 1990s, as a contribution to this now flourishing subfield of scholarship. Both genealogy itself (and new technological and commercial developments in the field) and academic work on genealogy has multiplied since [4–11]. My early work on genealogy [12] was framed by a concern with the extent to which critical approaches to conventional models of identity and belonging overlooked the complex and sometimes progressive possibilities of genealogy. Despite the vital critical work of challenging racialized and ethnically exclusive models of nationhood, there was a sense that, within critical scholarship, genealogy stood for understandings of collective identity to be deconstructed, discarded, and displaced by politically progressive models of place, culture, and identity that emphasized fluidity, mobility, and hybridity over rootedness and purity. It seemed to be assumed that interests in roots and ancestry are necessarily entangled in, tainted by, or reinforce ideas of exclusive, pure, and primordial categories of ethnicity and nationhood. Genealogy also carried the socially conservative associations of its traditionally masculinist male lineages and elitist pedigrees. This was before the popular interest in genealogy and its media presence had taken off, prompting increasing scholarly interest in engaging more fully with this cultural phenomenon.

Rereading that work, I am reminded of my sense of working to make a convincing case for moving beyond these critical assumptions about, or dismissal of, genealogy. This explains the degree to which I was particularly determined to explore the way in which the practice of genealogy can itself trouble genealogical models of relatedness and ideas of ethnic or national purity. This understanding of genealogy as a practice that can be a critical tool in addressing questions power and inequality has become a notable analytical emphasis in recent work. Genealogy has been figured as constructive and even therapeutic means of addressing the nature and costs of the intersections of race, class, and gendered subordination [9,12–17]. This starting point for much of this work is indeed a critical engagement with the ways in which genealogy and family history, including family history in the media especially television, can elide questions of power and inequality in the past and the present. Recent efforts to address the potential of genealogy to be undertaken in ways that stimulate and inform a critical and progressive engagement with structures of power and privilege offer practical frameworks for harnessing personal interests in ancestry to address wider political questions of historical and contemporary inequality and injustice [9,15–17].

However, returning to these issues via my more recent work on ideas of origins and ancestry in anthropological genetics and genetic genealogy, I want to foreground the need for this attention to genealogy's progressive potential to be paralleled by continued vigilance in addressing the less progressive dimensions of genealogical imaginaries and models of relatedness. My focus is not so much on genealogy itself but the wider genealogical imaginaries and genealogical versions of relatedness that may in different ways be evoked in, reinforced through, challenged by, or resisted in genealogy in practice. Here I want to provide a framework for considering genealogical versions of relatedness.

It is one that acknowledges the validity of these arguments about the value of genealogy in practice for many, but is alert to the troubling nature of genealogical categorizations and differentiations, especially those which are figured in terms of concepts that seem to be most progressive, including ideas of hybridity, diversity, and universal humanity. I offer here a geographical perspective on ideas of genealogical relatedness, shared descent, and difference.

## 2. Genealogical Relatedness: Geographical Perspectives

Genealogy is a historical form of knowledge and practice. The family tree is a model of genealogical relations through generational time. To research one's genealogy is to address genealogical relationships that stretch back from the present. Its sources are historical records and its methods are largely archival whether accessed within repositories of genealogical sources or on-line. Dates and documentary evidence are crucial. However, it is also an imaginative exercise in considering the place of ancestors within historical contexts, sometimes only known sketchily, and sometimes more fully through wider reading and thinking about the past [4]. But it is also, I would argue, often a deeply geographical practice with geographical imaginative dimensions (see also [18]). Genealogies can in fact be historical geographies [19]. Though, in the most formal sense, the places of ancestors lives—the place of birth, marriage, and burial—only supplement rather than constitute the fact of a genealogical relationship on a genealogical chart, these places are often profoundly important in a family history. This is whether they are largely encompassed within a relatively small geographical area or whether they are located across a much wider geography through long distance migration. Significant places and movement between places, at multiple scales, are as much a part of family history as dates.

Furthermore, much of contemporary genealogy, especially in the United States, is shaped by the deep social and cultural significance of an ancestral origin place to personal and collective identity. In the parlance of popular genealogy, knowing one's "roots" is not just about genealogical knowledge of ancestors but of "where they came from" and thus "where we/I come from" in some fundamental sense. There are in fact two geographical imaginaries at work in the idea of genealogical roots. One is of a singular origin place and the ideal of a symmetry between place, culture, and belonging. This is an ideal of being indigenous, of an unbroken and authentic relationship between place of birth, ancestry, and presence, of not being from somewhere else. It is often tied to a genealogical model of identity in which identity is a direct function of genealogy and genealogical inheritance. It is in fact at odds with non-Western indigenous models of place and identity [20]. However, in complex modern societies, this is a deeply appealing model of belonging because of its simplicity, security, and singularity. Yet, genealogy is as much a matter of multiplicity: of endlessly ramifying lines each with their own geographies of origin and migration. Genealogy, especially when shaped by the dominant emphasis on the value of comprehensive research and full family trees, both demands and requires a geographical imagination that encompasses spatially stretched lineages, migration routes, and a multitude of ancestrally significant places rather than a single ultimate point of ancestral origin. Both of these two geographical imaginaries—of singular or multiple origins—inform the journeys people make to genealogically significant places in what has come to be described as roots tourism [21,22], whose routes reflect the historical geographies of modern European immigration and colonial settlement, the enforced migration of the Atlantic slave trade, and the complex geographies of more recent global migrations.

This attentiveness to the geographical dimensions of genealogy can be extended by considering the relationships between genealogical connections, social relations, and collective identity at different scales. I do so here by addressing ideas of genealogical relatedness in relation to the scales of the familial, national, and global.

### 2.1. Genealogy, Family, and Kinship

Starting at the conventionally intimate scale of the family, my interest here is in exploring the relationships between genealogy as a form of knowledge and practice and the practice of relatedness,

or to put it another way, the doing of genealogy and the doing of family. It is useful at this point to consider the relationship between genealogy and family history, both in terms of the difficulty of distinguishing between them and in terms of their distinctiveness. It is probably the case that genealogy, in the broadest and everyday use of the term, is indistinguishable from or used interchangeably with family history. While genealogy in its strictest sense is a record of the empirical facts of ancestry and the practice of producing that empirical record, family history encompasses stories and memories, and often the social context of previous generations' lives. However, in the contemporary context, genealogy often stands for both, as personal and historical narratives are interwoven with the vital statistics of genealogy (names and dates of birth, death, and parentage). However, it is worth pointing out that a genealogy is by definition about relationships defined by those vital statistics. A family tree has to be annotated or supplemented by other sorts of images and text to include stories and context. It also needs adapting to represent relationships that those statistics preclude: adoptees, family members who aren't family in the strict sense, and families formed through ova or sperm donation in assisted reproduction. Family trees of familial relationships are not necessarily always genetic trees of strict biological kinship, or at least do not have to be.

My point in addressing the blurred distinction between family history and genealogy, and yet the enduring centrality of conventional genealogical relations within genealogy, is to raise the issue of the relationship between understandings and practices of genealogy and understandings and practices of kinship. It is to argue that a genealogy does not describe family. It is not equivalent to kinship. It is not an account of relatedness. Undoubtedly, genealogy is often motivated by an interest in finding out about previous generations because of their place in the pattern of relations that leads to the present generation and to individual family historian. Ancestors matter because they are ancestors, defined so by their location in a grid of genealogical connections. Genealogy is framed by the wider cultural significance of ancestry to personal identity and shaped by the significance of particular relationships, in all their different configurations of intimacy and distance, within a living family. Yet, to think of genealogical relatedness, that is relatedness defined in terms of genealogical links alone, as standing for family and kinship is to exclude the flexible, elastic, and practiced nature of familial relatedness and kinship. Relatedness or kinship, unlike genealogy, stands for the ways in which family relationships through birth and parentage are deeply significant in understandings of family but are at the same time not understood to be absolutely determining of the nature, quality, and pattern of family relationships and the configuration of emotionally "close" relationships. This is central to anthropological approaches to kinship [23]. Thinking of relatedness as a practice in which those who count as close family are not simply a function of genealogical closeness but depend on the ongoing practice of kinship, through which a range of family forms are continuously enacted, stands in contrast to a strictly genealogical account of who is related to whom in the past and in the present.

While family historians work to combine their own understandings of the nature of family as a social practice with the strictness of a genealogical model of closeness and distance, genetic genealogy by its very nature emphasizes strictly biological models of genealogical relations. Therefore, one troubling dimension of the emphasis on genealogical relatedness in popular genealogy, especially its geneticized versions, and in wider public culture, is the degree to which it suggests that family relations of many kinds—as daughter, son, or parent—that are not biological are in a fundamental sense inauthentic. Furthermore, those who do not know or have no interest in knowing about their birth parents or previous generations as adoptees negotiate this difference (as "lack" or as resistance) in a context in which the idea of genealogical knowledge as integral to identity—"knowing who you are, through knowing where you came from" genealogically—has become so deeply embedded.

However, there is an important sense in which a contrast between the work of researching the empirical facts of genealogy and the practice of relatedness does not hold. This is because the practice of genealogy, especially when it includes an interest in family stories, can be a means of doing family. This is in the sense of the making of new or renewed family relationships socially around the sharing of genealogical interests and information within or between generations and within and

beyond the immediate family. Individuals practice their own place in those generations as custodians of genealogical knowledge and weave new members into the family through genealogical gifts of knowledge and labor. Genealogy can thus be a practice of making relations rather than just descriptive of those relations [24].

Nevertheless, this genealogical making of relations, like the practice of kinship more widely, is not simply matter of undifferentiated inclusion. Though there is an emphasis in genealogy on the value of an extended comprehensive record—with no missing ancestors or branches on the family tree—this does not mean that the genealogical making of relations is not, like kinship more widely, a practice in which who counts as family depends not on genealogy alone but on the host of other reasons why individuals may enact and be defined in terms of degrees of closeness and distance. How genealogy is used to make or not make relations is part of the wider practice of kinship. Genealogical knowledge can be withheld, shared with only some members of a family and not others. Interests in particular sides of the family over others can be responses to or expressions of alienation from living family members [6]. To complicate this further, genealogy in practice can also suggest that the quality of family relationships depends on practice rather than being a function of genealogical relatedness. Just as families can include members who are defined as family not through genealogy but because of the quality of their social relations, genealogy can be a process of forging family-like relationships with those who do not share genealogy in terms of actual genealogical connections but share genealogical interests. This is captured in one family historian's comment to me that the friends she has made through genealogy are "like family!" [25]. Strictly genealogical models of relatedness elide and at worst undermine the significance of relationships shaped through social practice—the doing of social relations—including through the practice of genealogy.

## 2.2. Genealogical Communities

The geographical perspective I am outlining here is one which is particularly alert to what models of collective identity at one scale can imply for understandings of collective identity at other scales. This is especially in terms of how ideas of global and familial genealogical relatedness can inform or be used to suggest how the population of a state is understood in terms of national and ethnic identity and difference. This is thus an insistence on the always political nature of accounts of collective identity that deploy genealogical relatedness as the criteria of inclusion and exclusion. The potency of a conventional model of the nation as a community of shared descent, sharing a territory, a myth of geographical origin and ancestry, has not simply dissipated with late twentieth century discourses of multicultural pluralism. Instead, it both surfaces in its ethnically exclusive forms and is reworked in relation to ideas of hybridity, interconnection, and diversity. At its heart is the idea of the natural correlation between shared ancestry, collective identity, and shared space. This correlation underpins a geo-political vision of a world made up of a mosaic of distinct natural communities of shared descent in clearly delimited national homelands. It has violent consequences: ethno-nationalist conflict, the subjugation of ethnic minority groups, and racialized models of belonging. It continues to haunt countries, such as the US, that are the products of complex geographies of settlement despite discourses of diversity and hybridity, because of the potency of the idea of a country founded by those of shared ancestry whose culture defines, or should define, the nation.

The resurgence of the most overt models of ethnic-nationalism are deeply troubling but relatively easy to identify. However, it is more difficult to discern the more subtle ways in which a genealogical version of the nation may be deployed especially when framed or inflected by multicultural discourses of diversity, interconnection, and hybridity. It is important to do so both because of the effects of these discourses in themselves and how they might feed more illiberal versions. Let us take the ideas of genealogical interconnectedness as an alternative to ideas of genealogical and ethnic or national purity. These ideas have different political implications in different contexts. In everyday practice, genealogy can be used to support and celebrate singular and pure ethnic identities. However, as I explored in my work on the practice of family history by those identifying with Irish ancestry in the

United States and elsewhere, on family history in Northern Ireland, and on ideas of Gaelic noble descent, (as well as the science and cultures of new genetic genealogy), the emphasis on genealogical exactitude and completeness, often encourages people to engage with hybrid and mixed ancestries whether as Irish-Americans or members of what are taken to be distinctive communities of descent in Northern Ireland: Catholic/nationalist and Protestant/Unionist. The genealogical entanglements of groups traditionally figured as separate communities of descent has similarly been used to challenge ideas of ethnic purity and emphasis cultural interconnection and exchange, even if shaped by unequal power relations. People may recognize the limits of ideas of ethnic purity through discovering ethnic diversity and hybridity in their own family trees.

However, an emphasis on genealogical relatedness as an alternative to antagonism and antipathy can morph into less constructive models of genealogical affinity and difference. In the UK context, for example, the presence of Irish ancestry in so many English family trees could be evoked as the basis for addressing the historical and contemporary relationships between Ireland and the United Kingdom in constructive ways. However, if genealogical interconnectedness is posited as a natural basis for sense of solidarity or shared identity, even if between traditionally opposed groups, it still suggests a model of social relations in which there is positive correlation between genealogical and genetic similarity and the quality the relationships between people and between groups. Ideas of genealogical affinity can have racialized limits if this suggests that there is no natural basis for connection and care between people who do not share ancestry because of their geographically distant ancestral origins. In societies shaped by complex histories of migration, people's genealogies will be complex maps of multiple places of origin and the pathways between them, but to different degrees and to different extents, some much less globalized than others. People can thus be understood as genealogically interconnected but to different degrees and in different ways. In the UK context, there is a challenge to articulate the significance of this genealogical complexity without resorting to a generalized argument that Britain is a genealogically "mongrel nation." This is because it can leave open the opportunity for racist counter-arguments that distinguish between the genealogical connections of white British people (or white Europeans) and those with ancestral origins elsewhere [26,27]. The challenge is also to avoid an emphasis on genealogical interconnection implying that there are diminishing natural grounds for shared identity with increasing genealogical difference. The ideas of the nation as community of shared descent, even if imagined as a complex one, still implies that some groups can be more easily incorporated into the national community than others [28]. A genealogical version of collective identity differentiates between those who are more and less genealogically connected and can imply gradients of "natural" affinity and "natural" belonging.

### 2.3. Global Genealogy

What then of the idea of a global family tree? Imagining humanity as global community of shared origins and shared decent has been an important trope of liberal anti-racism for more than half a century. Indeed, since the late 1970s, it has been supported by research in human evolutionary genetics, which has located shared human origins in east Africa. Though scientific debates continue about whether there was a single or multiple "out of Africa" migration of humans, the African origin of all of humanity is now firmly embedded in public understandings of human evolutionary history and is often argued to demonstrate the power of scientific studies of human genetic variation to challenge racism and ideas of race. The idea of a global family is undoubtedly positive in many ways. In extending the most positive associations of the family as an intimate sphere of affection, love, and loyalty, to the world as a whole, it suggests a globally extensive imaginary of care, solidarity, and compassion across distance and across cultural difference. It challenges a racialized conception of humanity as composed of discrete categories of difference. This is why the idea of the global human family has been so central to the US National Geographic's Genographic Project to study contemporary human genetic variation in order to reconstruct early human migration [27,29–31]. So, in contrast to the ways in which a genealogical model of collective identity at the national scale clearly works

to differentiate between people and distribute natural belonging in divisive ways, the idea of the genealogical unity of humanity seems to be a constructive alternative to ethno-nationalism and racist models of human difference.

However, this idea of a global, human family tree also needs some consideration. This is because of the way the progressive associations of the idea of the human family tree can deflect attention from the ways in which those genealogical practices of organizing relations according to degrees of genealogical closeness and difference are also at work in the study of human genetic variation and are integral to the genetic genealogy tests that are the by-products of these studies. The genealogical tree by its very nature is about both connections between people and the ordering of those relations in terms of degrees of genealogical closeness. This is also the case in the model of a human family tree. There are several issues of concern about what a genealogical model of humanity implies for understandings of human unity and difference. One is the linearity of the tree model. The complexity of human genealogical relationships cannot be captured in this figure of a branching tree. An impossibly dense and effectively illegible diagram of genealogically entanglements might get closer to figuring this, if it could ever be produced. Yet, the genealogical tree is a central figurative device in descriptions of human evolutionary history and human genetic variation. Visual representations of the early human migration are depicted as branches off an original African root, and phylogenetic trees are one key way of representing human genetic variation. They depict the historical-geographical origins and spread of distinctive inherited patterns of variation and the evolutionary relationships in between. However, they can imply genealogically differentiated human groups. These groups are not usually named as races but can suggest a human family tree with discrete and genetically distinct branches. This is thus a matter of the complex and contested way in which ideas of race are simultaneously undermined and reworked in human genomics despite its liberal anti-racist ethos.

This is not just a matter of debate within science and among a community of critics since this is a scientific field that is remarkable in the degree to which it has tapped into and shaped the public and popular domain of cultural practice and interest in ancestry and origins, through the development of genetic genealogy. This is a development that deserves a fuller discussion than there is room for here (see [27]). However, this is a place to reiterate one crucial concern about the idea of a global family tree. This is a concern about how consumers are encouraged to seek the rewards and fulfilment of genealogical knowledge of “deep ancestry” on the basis of the idea of a natural affinity between those who share ancestry. As I have argued elsewhere [27,28], the genetic tests sold by the Genographic Project and other companies are not sold on the basis that they confirm the consumer as part of an undifferentiated global family, since that is already a given. Instead, they offer the consumer a sense of their particular place on a differentiated human family tree and sense of connection to those who also share that ancestry. My concern thus is the degree to which this model of affinity between those who share ancestry can imply natural communities of care among those who are genealogically connected and thus genetically similar and the attenuation of care with increasing genetic and genealogical difference whether within complex multi-ethnic societies or across geographical distance. The idea of the global family tree thus has implications not only for understandings of collective identity and difference at the global scale in terms of an imaginative geography of difference, but also in terms of genealogical models of ethnicity and nationhood.

### 3. Conclusions

Foregrounding the implications of ideas of genealogical relatedness for ideas of inclusion, exclusion, similarity, and difference, including ideas of national, ethnic, and racial difference, is not to suggest that the popular practice of genealogy is suspect or inherently problematic. This is not a wholesale critique of family history or a reductive over-generalizing account of the implications of popular genealogy. Indeed, my understanding of what genealogy is and does comes from my effort to understand the nature of genealogy empirically, across a range of contexts. The nature, meaning, and effects of how genealogy is used to make sense of individual or collective identity depend on its

context. Genealogy ranges from personally meaningful but largely un-contentious projects to explore a family tree [31], to genealogical practices that are ways of making sense of deeply political contexts and recovering genealogical knowledge in response to historical violence [32,33]. Recent efforts to consider how genealogy can be used in progressive and critical ways offer important practical as well as conceptual tools for doing so [9,15–17]. However, an appreciation of the progressive possibilities of genealogy does not mean that the problems of ideas of genealogical relatedness more broadly should be overlooked. The popular emphasis on the ideas of the psychological and emotional significance of knowing “who you are” genealogically should not deflect attention away from the implications of differentiating between groups on the basis of ancestry.

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