United States of Data: Genealogy and Technologies of Intimate Information in Modern America

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UNITED STATES OF DATA: GENEALOGY AND TECHNOLOGIES OF INTIMATE INFORMATION IN MODERN AMERICA

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Francesca Morgan, *A Nation of Descendants: Politics and the Practice of Genealogy in U.S. History*. University of North Carolina Press, 2021. xxxii+301 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. $95.00.

Susan Pearson, *The Birth Certificate: An American History*. University of North Carolina Press, 2021. x+376 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. $37.95.

I'm pretty sure he never gave him a thought, but if Michel Foucault had to imagine a character perfectly figured to design and implement a biopolitics of the new American state it would have been Lemuel Shattuck. Born in Massachusetts in 1793, Shattuck was a teacher, historian, and bookseller. He was also a founder of both the American Statistical Association (in 1839) and the New England Historic and Genealogical Society (in 1844). This twinned focus was the key: genealogy was the underlying logic of the systems of recordation that would allow for multiple public uses, including what Shattuck described as the public health interests in calculating birth and mortality rates from family information. The author of a history of his hometown of Concord in 1835, the promoter of legislation to require vital information collection in 1839, author of a "Complete System of Ecclesiastical and Parochial Registration" in 1840 and *The Complete System of Family Registration* in 1841, Shattuck designed and implemented the Boston census of 1845 and had a key influence on the form of the U.S. census for 1850; he also authored a report on public health for Massachusetts in 1850. And then in 1855 Shattuck published *Memorials of the Descendants of William Shattuck, the Progenitor of the Families in America that have Borne his Name*. He died just a few years later.[1] A figure in the midst of hectic transitions, Shattuck is enormously useful for understanding what became a preoccupation of the administrative state: accelerating its capacity to collect and deploy data, especially intimate information about individuals and their relationships.

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Information made particularly digestible in a digital system, data has three functional states: at rest, in motion, in use. That we now comprehend ourselves as having "personal data," or of being composed of data exchanged in a marketplace, is itself a notable feature of these states of data in a digital society. That genealogy, one of the most popular online activities and one of the most enthusiastically collected and exchanged sets of information, could be described as foundationally about data would surprise few. But the central importance of genealogy to the modern data state, modern genealogy's origins in systems of early modern recordation and then intensifying accumulation and deployment through administrative state contexts—and then via digital technology—might make us sit up and take notice. And start writing more histories to explicate it.

Genealogy is biopolitics laid bare. While Foucault's attention to biopolitics and biopower ranged over medicine and capitalism (and their interrelationship), other forms of surveillance and sovereignty would coagulate to assert control over populations. Shattuck's rhapsodic zeal for systems of collecting information was precisely in this line. Foucault philosophized about genealogy in the generic sense of relations of descent, as one of the subjects he posited as without historicity that became politically naturalized (like sexuality). Yet genealogy qua genealogy, the study of ancestry and descent, lends itself equally and almost transparently to biopolitics and biopower. How data collection and its uses in the form articulated as genealogy have come to dominate the public embrace of intimate information feels particularly urgent as we mark the transition from digitized records of biological and family information, to born-digital records of same, to extracted biological matter itself via DNA and then its representation as exchanged and connected records. That really puts the bio in biopower.

The astonishing accumulation of individual and family data created by and in the modern United States is the subject of both Francesca Morgan's *A Nation of Descendants* and Susan Pearson's *The Birth Certificate.* From different vantages, Morgan and Pearson offer deeply researched perspectives on how long and how willingly Americans and their families have seen themselves and offered themselves to be produced as core data. *A Nation of Descendants* is a chock-a-block accounting of the proliferation of genealogical practices in modern America. From voluntary organizations and libraries to straight-up eugenicists to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the late-19th- and early-20th-century phenomenon of organized genealogy produced both racist tools as well as self-defined groups that created genealogy organizations and practices sometimes with and sometimes against that racism. *The Birth Certificate* narrates the efforts to create a uniform system of recordation across the United States, records which Morgan's enthusiasts have explored, exploited, and relied on. Pearson is interested in the attendant cultural politics of the

19th- and 20th-century drive to create that system, and in how the process of defining and then implementing that system unfolded. Though Morgan and Pearson have situated their work within different historiographies, the cumulative contribution to our understanding of how the modern American state collects and then refracts information about our most intimate experiences and relationships is especially potent. Morgan is interested in how genealogy "has been political, in the sense of reinforcing formal and informal group hierarchies" (p. 1). She has organized her broad study into two sections, one focused on genealogy in the context of exclusion, mostly before the mid-20th century, and one on inclusion, mostly from the later 20th century. The chapters in the first section are topical, taking in turn genealogy and heritage groups and white supremacy, Mormon genealogists, and then together three groups explicitly targeted or excluded by the previous two: "Native Americans, African Americans, and American Jews." From these chapters we can see genealogists both practicing exclusion and practicing genealogy in the face of exclusion. Chapters in the second section of *A Nation of Descendants* treat the phenomenon of Alex Haley's *Roots*, published in 1976, genealogy as a commercial enterprise throughout the 20th century, and the rise of DNA testing. The politics of genealogy and who was and could be acknowledged as participating in what we might think of as Big Genealogy—an organized and funded practice of voluntary or commercial groups—remains Morgan's focus throughout. She argues that it is important and useful to study genealogy in the United States because genealogists "furnish an array of paradoxes, groundbreaking institutions, and theories to test," (p. 9) including around the character of democratic culture and the co-existence of the narrative of the self-made man and near-obsessions with lineage. And that genealogy reveals sharp and constant racial and other hierarchies of exclusion.

Importantly, Morgan notes that the history of genealogy is "thin and recent" (p. xx) in its broad chronology her work joins Francois Weil's, whose lively *Family Trees: A History of Genealogy in America* (2013) is more anecdotal but sketches some of the same terrain.[2] *A Nation of Descendants* is a much fuller book, even dense; each chapter might be a book subject in itself, and while sometimes this density suggests the richness of the topic, at others it simply overwhelms it. Every one of the topics Morgan takes up—sometimes multiple in a single chapter—would profit from a book or more. The imbrication of modern genealogy with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints alone, for example, has to pervade *A Nation of Descendants* if only for the accelerating role that Mormons have played in making genealogy more accessible and commercially viable, as well as spiritually legible to their growing global numbers. But subjects such as the organized pursuit of genealogy among Black, Jewish, and Native American families have such disparate sources and implications that Morgan can only begin to explore them.

Morgan is at her best in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and on women and women's activism—as in the heritage societies she profiled so compellingly and fully in her first book, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (2005), about women's groups such as the Daughters of the American Revolution. Two chapter sections stand out as particularly revealing and suggestive: on Susa Young Gates (1856-1933) in a chapter in the first section on Mormons, and on Pauli Murray (1910-1985) in a chapter on Black genealogy before *Roots* in *A Nation of Descendants*'s second section. Gates, a suffragist and the daughter of the second president of the LDS and the leader of their exodus to Salt Lake City, was one of the organizers of a broad swath of Mormon heritage activities, including the Daughters of Utah Pioneers and the Women's Committee of the Genealogical Society of Utah. Gates's extensive papers are online through the Latter-day Saints, and offer an extraordinary look at the range and depth of her activities.[3] Doing her own research on the Young family, including in trips to New England, Gates published *Lessons in Genealogy* in 1912, ran genealogy workshops, and wrote a weekly genealogy advice column for the *Deseret News*. The scribbles on the backs of envelopes alone offer fascinating insight into Gates's ambitions and process as a genealogist and organizer. Since founding prophet and president Joseph Smith first identified baptism of the dead as important to the church, genealogy had taken on a particular significance for Mormons. But the more important genealogy became for Mormons, including with a crucial additional revelation from its leadership in 1918 that added to its theological impetus, the less tolerant it was of a woman's leading role. Gates was eclipsed by men in each genealogy arena. In the year before she died, she taught a popular—and derided—class on women's biography that stressed the importance of women's daily, ordinary experiences.

Pauli Murray was an academic and civil rights activist and lawyer focused on race and sex discrimination; her analysis and compilation of *States' Laws on Race and Color* (1951) was foundational to pathbreaking court cases including *Brown v. Board of Education*. Later in her life, Murray became an Episcopal priest, one of the first to break the sex barrier, though her own gender identity was fluid.[4] Throughout the challenges that she faced from educational and professional institutions, Murray focused on her family's histories. She said of *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family* (1956), an account that included material on 18th- and 19th-century enslaved ancestors, that "I was curious to know how far a Negro family in America can push into the jungles of its mysterious origins" (p. 102). The family history she uncovered included a white enslaver who had raped one of her great grandmothers. As accomplished as Murray was in so many domains, she connected family history to the dominant themes of American history and thus to her rights work. In her syndicated newspaper column, "My Day," Eleanor Roosevelt called *Proud Shoes* "American history which all American citizens should read."[5] Like

Haley in *Roots,* but decades earlier, Murray was exploring very publicly not only her genealogy as a means of self-exploration, but as Black history and to document the multiple legacies of racist violence. Morgan notes that *Roots* as a book and then a television series was an extraordinary phenomenon by any measure, including for promoting genealogy; "on one Saturday shortly after the *Roots* show aired, patrons waited in line for four hours for genealogy services at the National Archives in Washington" (p. 112). But *Roots* was not the beginning of Black genealogy, nor was it the beginning of Black literary explication of family histories into and out of slavery.[6] The genealogy work that Gates created and promoted, the practice that Murray pursued and the history she published showed the contours of genealogy's potential–and power.

Pearson's history of the birth certificate in the United States has its own moments of super-charged media and public attention, including the frenzy around the birth certificate of President Barack Obama and the racist birther conspiracy ginned up by, among others, the erstwhile reality television performer and businessman Donald Trump. In fact, Obama's birth certificate is the first image in the book. But these flashpoints are perhaps mercifully few and far between. *The Birth Certificate* is an exemplary study of the steadily accumulating capacity of the administrative state, manifested by the work of inspired and diligent officials sure of the utility of data. The story is not quite one of creating order from chaos, as Lemuel Shattuck would have desired. He and others claimed that ragtag systems of recordation across the country produced weak public services including public health; suffering from a lack of full information about the population, how could governments work on their behalf?

The "career of a document" (p. 20) that Pearson traces is a history of officialdom's efforts and popular resistance. A three-part, loosely chronological structure allows Pearson to focus on "Building Birth Registration," "Living with Birth Registration," and "Contesting Birth Registration." The cast of characters on the outside and the inside of the bureaucracies that were alternately advocating for and tasked with carrying out an expansive recordation system is as varied as the American people the system hoped to capture on record. If men like Shattuck were early fired up about the potential for vital registration to reveal information about public health like birth and mortality rates, the next generation included those like Edwin Snow of Rhode Island, the city's first Superintendent of Public Health and an advocate of a regular house-to-house census to acquire information on births. This method, Snow boasted, produced "almost complete returns" (p. 52). By the end of the 19th century, professional organizations like the new American Public Health Administration (founded in 1872) would be joined by federal agencies, the National Board of Health (created in 1879) and a permanent Census Bureau (in 1902). A "model

law for birth registrations" soon followed, with 26 states and the District of Columbia designing conforming legislation by 1915.

Over the 20th century, other legislation and efforts at regulating vital information, especially birth registration, would follow. Different impulses drove administrative and legislative innovation, including public health concerns, especially child welfare. The Children's Bureau of the Labor Department, for example, founded in 1912, was just one of the players in the complex campaign to regulate child labor. Requiring proof of age for employment under legislation like the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 was an example of the argument advocates had been making for decades that birth certificates would make individuals "able to prove, in a legal way, their age and place of birth" and made "the campaign against child labor…the first chance that reformers had to put this claim to the test" (p. 174).

The advocates' and officials' enthusiasm for birth registration was always matched by apathy, skepticism, or outright resistance among their target audience. Pearson recounts the story of an early 20th-century PR film, *The Error of Omission* (1912), which contrasted the care a man took to register his pedigreed dog with his lax approach to registering his son's birth. It even becomes difficult to enroll the boy Tommy in school. When his father died unexpectedly, leaving the family impoverished, there is an inheritance from an uncle but the family has to scramble to prove the relationship, rescued only by a scribbled note on the back of the dog's registration. Naturally Tommy secures his own child's birth certificate immediately, determined not to make his father's consequential error. Pearson points out that it was precisely its role "to open and close the gates of modern childhood as defined by the state" (p. 124)—to schooling and employment—that ultimately gave the birth certificate real value to ordinary people neither fired up by enthusiasm for statistical completeness or even for public health.

But officials were not only interested in a child's birthdate and parents' names; classifying race became a driving feature of federal Indian policy and racist segregation laws. From a drive to birth registration to "reform" Indian mothers (p. 148) to the fixation on blood quantum under the allotment programs, the federal Office of Indian Affairs put itself in the business of assessing and policing ancestry. And "nowhere were the ideological links between vital registration and administration of the racial state made more apparent than in Virginia" (p. 197). Virginia's Racial Integrity Act, passed in 1924, defined "white," "Indian," and "Negro" persons to criminalize intermarriage, and to instantiate separate institutions including schools; that law was only overturned in 1967 as part of the Supreme Court's decision in *Loving v. Virginia*. Though the original bill would have also required separate racial registration documentation, its advocates settled for race at birth registration and the infamous one-drop rule that would define a person as "non-Caucasian."

Much as Lemuel Shattuck and his successors would have liked it to, the narrative of a birth certificate and other information systems bringing order from chaos isn't sustained by the history on either end. The practices of registration that preceded the work of Pearson's administrative army was not as ragtag as those like Shattuck (or the older literature Pearson cites) suggested nor, as Pearson shows with a sensitivity to the complexity of bureaucracy, was the system that resulted as coherent. The family Bible as the standard repository of family history, for example, which Shattuck derided as so unsatisfactory, only really emerged in the 19th century with the proliferation of more affordable print. Too, in the earlier period what lay alongside a family's own records was a public accounting of their vital information that was also not as chaotic as Shattuck depicted, but served a very different set of expectations and purposes that were just as reflective of hierarchy and power as the regime the birth certificate ushered in. Ultimately, the birth certificate system that emerged remained as contested and often fragmentary as any records, with surveys and analyses especially related to the emerging expansion of citizenship documentation in the 21st century showing that significant percentages of Americans may not be able to access or never had them. Pearson also shows through the late 20th and 21st century how, for example, adoption and gender identity are just two of the ways that birth registration has been not only political and sensitive but partial in every sense of the word.

Of course there are always assertions about an earlier chronology—before the thing that is the subject of a modern study—that will make a reader more conversant with that earlier period queasy. And possibly over sensitive. I'm likely having that same reaction right now. But the obvious point about both of these books, that they are focused on modern America, and the ways that particular phenomena developed particular qualities in the modern period, is, well, obvious. Still, it is clear in the early history of modern nations how clearly they understood the role of information about their populace as an essential lever of power. European empires, marrying colonization with emerging commercial enterprise, embraced the power of paper—and paperwork.[8]

So no, neither the impetus to information nor the impulse to genealogy was new. What was new—what was modern and is so plain from the conjunction of these studies—was the form and organization of private and public enterprise that together created an engine of personalized data running on an infrastructure so pervasive we can barely see it for being surrounded by it. To match Pearson's focus on professional organizations and political advocacy groups with public officials, Morgan offers an important insight into the kinds of private associations that built this edifice. Libraries, for example, some public and some private, provided technical knowhow as well as sites for depositing and then accessing all this information. And, of course, the

extraordinary institutions of genealogy, from historical societies and research libraries to the plethora of specifically genealogical societies to the behemoth of them all, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, play a key connecting role between public data collection and its provision to genealogists.

Intimate data has never been single purpose. The conflicted ways that people marginalized in the United States have been subject to and have made use of their genealogies demonstrate just how multidimensional is the chess game of lineage claims. For Native American individuals, families, and communities, navigating the shifting requirements of colonial, state, and national governments has now existed in contest with community and tribal values around belonging and kin for hundreds of years. The political potential for intimate data is also there in some contexts, as Alondra Nelson has so compellingly shown for how DNA has been used for reparative and social justice work.[9]

Genealogy is able to do this work precisely because of the data it generates and deploys, but also because of its distinctive popular appeal. The intensity of genealogy's popularity as a pastime, as a business proposition, as entertainment—it's hard to find a competitor (or at least one that's SFW). It's also phenomenally compelling as personal and collective history. One appeal, and certainly one that the success of Henry Louis Gates's PBS series "Finding Your Roots" and other genealogy shows has underscored, is that genealogical information can cut both with and also against conventional historical narratives. When, for example, Annette Gordon Reed took a firm grip on the third rail of American cultural politics by demonstrating the full extent of Thomas Jefferson's family with Sally Hemings, a woman he enslaved and his dead wife's half-sister, she also shone a bright light on the significance of family connections in Virginia, where a child's parents by law bestowed such divergent futures as freedom and slavery. As Gates commented to the *Washington Post*, "Carter G. Woodson said: 'A people cannot know its future until it knows its past….' and collectively the more we as Americans learn about our ancestry, the more we get an accurate picture of what it means to be American."[10]

We might equally say that the more we learn about Ancestry.com, and the rich and deep array of public data it and like institutions hold, the better we understand what it means to be an American today. As Lemuel Shattuck was composing the *Report of the General Plan for the Promotion of Public and Personal Health* for Massachusetts in 1850, he imagined being queried about the invasive nature of the information he proposed to collect in the name of the public interest. "If a child is born, if a marriage takes place, or if a person dies, in my house, it is my own affair; what business is it to the public?" (p. 23), one might reasonably ask. Shattuck's answer: it is absolutely in the public interest to collect a lot of information about people's private affairs. In the 20th century, architect of Virginia's Racial Integrity Act, eugenicist and white supremacist Walter Plecker, the state registrar for the Bureau of Vital Statis-

tics, used the new state records "to construct genealogies of [racially] suspect families," bragging that "even "Hitler's genealogical study of the Jews is not as complete" (p. 202).

The entwined nature of private and state uses of genealogy is not new to our digital world. Rather, it has deep structural roots in early modern nations, including the United States, that emerged from colonialism. Understanding this mutuality does not make the meaning that any single person or family or community finds in family history less profound; it simply offers us a way to understand why and how genealogy has become serious business. As we consider the production and transfer of intimate information across governments and corporations and its deployment for purposes from entertainment to biomedical development to authoritarian politics, the complex, robust, often unsettling motivations and achievements of the twentieth century as illuminated by Morgan and Pearson are essential, urgent context.

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1. Warren Winkelstein, "Lemuel Shattuck: Architect of American Public Health," *Epidemiology* 19: 4 (July 2008), p. 434; Lemuel Shattuck, "Ecclesiastical Register; or a Complete System of Ecclesiastical and Parochial Registration," *The American Quarterly Register* 12: 3 (February 1840), 285-92; *A Complete System of Family Registration* (1841); *Memorials of the Descendants of William Shattuck, the Progenitor of the Families in American that have Born his Name* (1855). Foucault's are not the only concepts or analyses of biopolitics or biopower, though he remains influential. He wrote about "Biopolitics," or the associated use of "biopower" as the production of national political power via its attention to bodies and their behaviors and conditions–and vice versa, in *History of Sexuality* and other works. A recent history of biopolitics in the early United States is Kathryn Olivarius, *Necropolis: Disease, Power, and Capitalism in the Cotton Kingdom* (2022).

2. The history of genealogy is recently enriched by studies of early modern England and Europe with important implications for study of the United States, including Markus Friedrich, *The Maker of Pedigrees: Jakob Wilhelm Imhoff and the Meanings of Genealogy in Early Modern Europe* (2023), Stéphane Jott, *Selling Ancestry: Family Directories and the Commodification of Genealogy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2023), Imogen Peck, "'Of No Sort of Use?': Manuscripts, Memory, and the Family Archive in Eighteenth-Century England," *Cultural and Social History* (Fall 2022),1-22, and a major project on ancestral thinking led by Professor Alexandra Walsham that includes her *Generations: Age, Ancestry and Memory in the English Reformations* (2023).

3. See for example notes on early eighteenth-century Young family deaths and property transmission on the back of a telegram from W.B. Dougall in 1895 when Gates was in Boston for research. Susa Young Gates papers, circa 1870-1933; GENEALOGICAL FILES; YOUNG FAMILY: CORRESPONDENCE AND RECORDS, A-W; Brigham family, circa 1900; W. B. Dougall telegram to Susa Young Gates; Church History Library, https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/25eecebf-7559-436b-8483-29cb539dbb41/0/0 (accessed: January 14, 2024).

4. Murray used she/her pronouns, which is why I use them here; if she had lived into the 21st century it is clear that she might have chosen differently. The National Museum of African American History and Culture, which hosts an online exhibit on *Proud Shoes* and Murray's genealogy, also uses she/her pronouns, but see also the discussion on the website of the Pauli Murray Center about their choice to use "he/him and they/them pronouns when discussing Pauli Murray's early life and she/her/hers when discussing Dr. Murray's later years." https://www.paulimurraycenter.com/pronouns-pauli-murray

5. Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day, October 23, 1956," *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Digital Edition* (2017), accessed 1/14/2024, https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydocedits.cfm?_y=1956&_f=md003624. Murray cited this review by Roosevelt in her own later memoir, *Song in a Weary Throat* (1987).

6. The historical context and extraordinary impact of *Roots* is explored in, for example, *Reconsidering Roots: Race, Politics, and Memory*, edited by Erica L. Ball and Kellie Carter Jackson (2017), to which Morgan contributed an essay on "Black Genealogy Before and After Roots."

7. Winkelstein, "Lemuel Shattuck, Architect of American Public Health."

8. For two recent examples, Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (2021), and Nicholas Popper, *The Specter of the Archive: Political Practice and the Information State in Early Modern Britain* (2024).

9. Alondra Nelson, *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation after the Genome* (2016); Kim Tallbear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (2013).

10. Robin Rose Parker, "Henry Louis Gates: Why it's Essential to Know More About Our Ancestors," *Washington Post*, October 18, 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2022/10/18/henry-louis-gates-race-finding-your-roots/