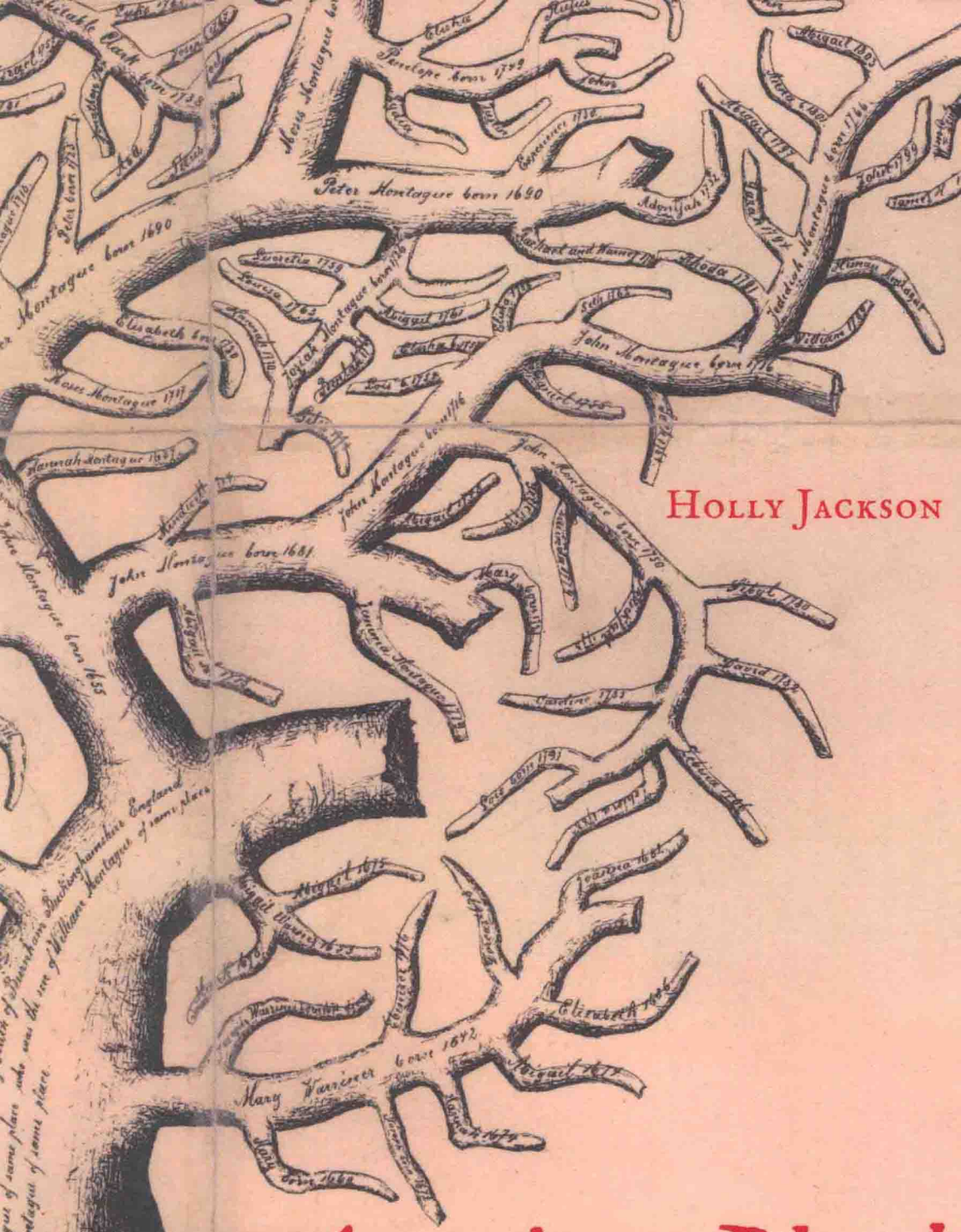

Holly Jackson

American Blood

The Ends of the Family in American Literature, 1850–1900

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For Sari Edelstein, Jane Jackson-Edelstein, and all unruly genealogies.

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American Blood

Introduction

I. THE NATIONALIZATION OF THE FAMILY

"In America the family," in any traditional sense of the term, "does not exist."[1] By the time Alexis de Tocqueville penned this account of democracy's corrosive effects on established forms of kinship, it was common knowledge that the eighteenth century had been an age of revolution in the family: "It has been universally remarked, that in our time the several members of a family stand upon an entirely new footing towards each other; that the distance which formerly separated a father from his sons has been lessened; and that paternal authority, if not destroyed, is at least impaired."[2] The institution of the family transformed as economic and ideological shifts undermined the patriarchal lineal family and analogous hereditary sociopolitical structures like monarchy and aristocracy.[3] By the middle of the nineteenth century, the modern domestic family had emerged, replacing the conventional economic functions of kin relations with the psychological, sentimental ties of the nuclear unit and theoretically detaching the family from wage labor and politics into distinct gendered domains.[4]

Even as our reliance on the "separate spheres" theory of nineteenth-century history has waned, this framing narrative of the family's transition from genealogical verticality to conjugal domesticity endures in American literary studies, underlying the prevailing view that the nineteenth-century novel's representation of this institution centers in sentiment, sympathy, and disciplinary intimacy.[5] *American Blood* attempts to redirect readings of the American family by foregrounding a culture-wide struggle over its definition and value, arguing on the contrary that the nineteenth

century was in fact the heyday of genealogical thinking in the United States.[6] This study offers a new vision of the American novel in this tumultuous period, highlighting works that protest the overvaluation of kinship in American culture, depicting the domestic family as exclusionary, deleterious to civic life, and antagonistic to the political enterprise of the United States. Far from venerating the family as the nucleus of the nation, these novels imagine, even welcome, the decline of this institution and the social order it supports.

While scholars have extensively documented the founding generation's use of the rhetoric of consanguinity and the importance of the "republican family" in representing and transmitting the new nation, an opposing strain of eighteenth-century thought has been ignored: many Americans viewed the family as a powerful conservative institution that inhibits social change and might undermine the project of the republic.[7] Revolutionary rhetoric was broadly distrustful and disparaging of genealogical paradigms, relying on the Enlightenment critique of parental authority to justify the break from England and theorize a social order disconnected from inheritance.[8] After the Revolution, early Americans passed laws for the express purpose of disempowering the family and prohibiting hereditary systems of power from taking root, curbing the dynastic impulses that potentially lurked in each domestic family from stratifying American society along bloodlines.

Despite this foundational concern that unseemly regard for ancestry or posterity might return to taint the new republic, the familial rhetoric of nationalism was deployed so energetically throughout the nineteenth century that reverence for the family came to seem like a core American value instead.[9] With the rise of nationalism, blood-borne status triumphed over Revolutionary ideals, and antipatriarchal republicanism was replaced by filial piety in American politics.[10] The 1820s were the fulcrum of this transitional period from the 1790s to the 1850s, marking a watershed in Americans' relationship to genealogy and also in conceptions of individual citizens' relationship to national history.[11] For one thing, the 200th anniversary of the Pilgrims' 1620 landing at Plymouth serendipitously preceded the fiftieth anniversary of a number of milestones of the War for Independence, and writers of this period worked to establish a causal, genealogical relation between these events that not only extended national history 150 years but also constituted an American bloodline suspiciously similar to the aristocratic lineages it was presumed to unseat. Catharine Sedgwick's 1835 historical romance *The Linwoods* reiterates the by-then commonsense connection between these events, asserting, "It has been justly said, that the seeds of our revolution

and future independence were sown by the Pilgrims."[12] This novel's revolutionary hero models a new American nobility: Eliot Lee's "parentage would not be deemed illustrious, according to any artificial code; but . . . he might claim what is now considered as the peculiar, the purest, the enduring, and in truth the *only* aristocracy of our own. He was a lineal descendent from one of the renowned *pilgrim fathers*, whose nobility, stamped in the principles that are regenerating mankind, will be transmitted by their sons on the Missouri and the Oregon, when the stars and garters of Europe have perished and are forgotten" (25).[13] Biological descent from the colonial settlers came to be regarded as membership in an American aristocracy, superior to the rejected aristocracies of Europe but exactly reproducing their values: endurance and purity. Although hereditary distinctions were regarded as anathema to the republican project in the preceding generation, genealogical pride reemerged in the nineteenth century, transformed into patriotism by a nationalist discourse that offered all Americans membership in a noble lineage.

For Daniel Webster, most famous as a grandiloquent senator from Massachusetts who supported the Compromise of 1850, the coincidence of the bicentennial of the Pilgrims' landing and the fiftieth-anniversary celebrations of Revolutionary War milestones provided a handy context for the construction of a genealogical national history, which he then called upon to assuage sectional division.[14] Webster's acclaimed 1820 oration in Plymouth, Massachusetts, clearly finesses the transition from republicanism to nationalism in relation to the family. This speech discredits the traditional dynastic family defined by the descent of real estate and offers in its stead a genealogical vision of the nation as a lineage that would provide all Americans with a relationship to the long dead and the unborn.

From the beginning, Webster assures his audience of their familial relationship to the Pilgrim settlers: "We have come to this Rock, to record here our homage for our Pilgrim Fathers . . . And we would leave here, also, for the generations which are rising up rapidly to fill our places, some proof that we have endeavored to transmit the great inheritance unimpaired."[15] This exemplifies prevalent antebellum rhetoric that cast Americanness as family property that each generation must safeguard and bequeath lineally. Oddly, this national familial duty of transmitting inheritance from the Pilgrims to the twentieth century frames Webster's celebration of republican property laws that break up family estates by curtailing the lineal descent of property. He declares one set of practices to be most crucial and correlative to social equality throughout American history: "A republican form of government rests not more on political

constitutions, than on those laws which regulate the descent and transmission of property. Governments like ours could not have been maintained, where property was holden [*sic*] according to the principles of the feudal system; nor, on the other hand, could the feudal constitution possibly exist with us."[16] He speaks specifically to the abolition of entail and primogeniture, rehearsing early republican arguments against the accumulation of family property through lineal descent, a system that works against sociopolitical equality.[17]

Webster denounced, on one hand, societies based on ancestral distinctions and the descent of real property, while on the other, enjoining his audience to regard their Americanness as a lineally inherited family property and their relationship to other Americans as genealogical. Negotiating this contradiction, he insists that some kinds of family pride are degrading while others are elevating: "There may be, and there often is, indeed, a regard for ancestry, which nourishes only a weak pride; as there is also a care for posterity, which only disguises an habitual avarice, or hides the workings of a low and groveling vanity. But there is also a moral and philosophical respect for our ancestors, which elevates the character and improves the heart."[18] Urging each listener to feel pride in "his country's heraldry" and "genealogy," he constructs nationalism as a modern blood identity that would replace the aristocratic family.[19]

Webster traces the genealogy of the United States to the Pilgrims' break with England, which he narrates in terms of the transition from consanguineous to conjugal models of family:

> As a son, leaving the house of his father for his own, finds, by the order of nature, and the very law of his being, nearer and dearer objects around which his affections circle, while his attachment to the parental roof becomes moderated, by degrees, to a composed regard and an affectionate remembrance; so our ancestors, leaving their native land, not without some violence to the feelings of nature and affection, yet, in time, found here a new circle of engagements, interests, and affections; a feeling, which more and more encroached upon the old, till an undivided sentiment, that this was their country, occupied the heart; and patriotism, shutting out from its embraces the parent realm, became local to America.[20]

Transplanting the Enlightenment rejection of parental authority in favor of more egalitarian, chosen relations onto the historical narrative of the Pilgrims' emigration, he metaphorizes their break from England as the "natural" evolution away from one's family of origin. However, in Webster's account, the Pilgrims' children embraced the land as their own

because their parents had lived and died there, so that in only one generation, American belonging became a symbolic property passed down the family line, a vertical inheritance from their fathers: "They beheld their fathers' graves around them, and while they read the memorials of their toils and labors, they rejoiced in the inheritance which they found bequeathed to them."[21] The first settlers, initially described as liberated sons seeking more modern relations, become patriarchs of the new vertical family of nationalism. The important work of this comparison is to establish that the United States does not represent a final break from the familial paradigms that had ordered old world societies; Webster understands it instead as a departure from one family and the beginning of a new one on different soil. Domestic families are not a fundamentally different kind of relation but rather links in this larger chain, the building blocks of generational lineage.

He concludes by imagining the twentieth-century Americans who would return to Plymouth 100 years in the future to "trace, through us, their descent from the Pilgrims" and once again memorialize "our common ancestors."[22] He forecasts that in 1920, "the voice of acclamation and gratitude, commencing on the Rock of Plymouth, shall be transmitted through millions of the sons of the Pilgrims, till it lose itself in the murmurs of the Pacific seas."[23] Webster foretells the settlement of the continent by people who share an identity as Americans by virtue of their shared descent from this particular New England colony, eliding not only the heterogeneity of colonial origins but also the sectional animosity of his own time.[24] His final lines invite unborn future generations to both the national family and the nuclear family, the twin structures that will replace the aristocratic family decried earlier in his remarks: "Advance, then, ye future generations! . . . We bid you welcome to this pleasant land of the fathers. . . . We greet your accession to the great inheritance which we have enjoyed. . . . We welcome you to the transcendent sweets of domestic life, to the happiness of kindred, and parents, and children."[25] Having distanced himself and the national history he celebrates from traditional forms of lineal descent associated with class stratification in which family lines are perpetuated in real property and titles, Webster offers his audience immortality through the vertical descent of national identity, a privileged lineage in which each nuclear family, charged with the reproduction of these Americans, will serve as a link.

The construction of genealogical nationalism in this period depended in part on the alteration of Americans' attitudes toward their individual ancestries. While pride or even curiosity about one's ancestors had been considered politically unacceptable in the early Republic, by the 1840s

and 1850s, genealogical research was considered scholarly and patriotic rather than aristocratic.[26] Historian François Weil has observed that "the practice of genealogy was still associated with some colonists' grasping attempts to secure social standing within the British empire. In the context of post-Revolutionary America's future-oriented egalitarianism, then, genealogy had no rightful function."[27] The most important figure in transforming individual Americans' relationship to family history was Webster's contemporary, John Farmer, the "father" of American genealogy.[28] Farmer and his associates persuaded Americans that studying their lineages was crucial to understanding and recording both local and national history. "They succeeded, in short, in inventing and legitimating ideologically acceptable forms of genealogical interest."[29] Farmer's landmark work, *The Genealogical Register of the First Settlers of New England* (1829) was the first American genealogical study to move beyond a single lineage, tracing the descent of multiple families and aiming at a broader readership than the small family circle these volumes usually addressed.[30] Inspired at least in part by the popularity of bicentennial celebrations of the Pilgrims' landing, the organizing principle of Farmer's book relates numerous lineages through this historical event, contributing to the construction of a genealogical nationalism with a mythic, single beginning in New England, which remains the catchall story of American origins.[31]

Thanks to Farmer and his contemporaries, delving into one's genealogy became popular as a patriotic hobby. Family records evolved from vital information on small groups to lavishly illustrated charts of multigenerational descent, further effacing the slim distinction between domestic and dynastic family forms.[32] Commercially printed genealogical registers allowed Americans to see their families as a part of a politicized genealogical web, sometimes emblematized by nationalist iconography (Figure I.1). These broadsides connect individual families to a genealogical American history, highlighting the domestic unit's vital contribution to the continuity of the overarching national lineage.[33] Americans recorded the births and deaths in their households as part of a larger national story, positioning them not only as personal life events but also as biopolitical data. Indeed, some declarations of loyalty to the Union during the Civil War borrowed the form of the illustrated family record, making explicit the nationalistic function of this form by substituting "American allegiance" for the chart's usual record of family history and membership (Figure I.2).

Illustrated family registers evidence the success of Webster's construction of nineteenth-century domestic families as links in a national lineage

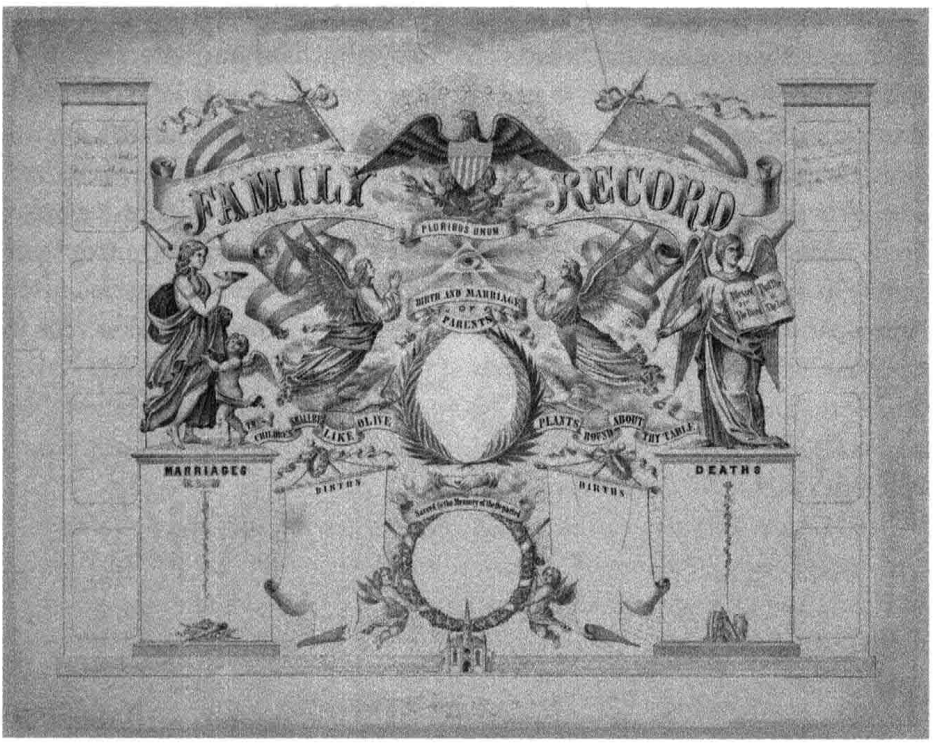

Figure I.1
Dittmore family record, undated, Library of Congress.

Figure I.2
Affirmation of Allegiance, 1862, Library of Congress.

stretching back to the "Pilgrim Parents."[34] This lithograph presents the landing at Plymouth as an ancestry shared by a husband and wife, a common inheritance that supercedes their biological parents (Figure I.3). Their children will not only unite these immediate forbears but also inherit the nation that has descended from the settlers of the Plymouth Colony. Moreover, like Webster, these texts present American culture not as a definitive break from ancestral paradigms of identity, but rather as a departure from one family in order to begin another. Genealogical arbors from this period often represent the immigrant ancestor as the trunk of a tree that takes root in the New World, dating the inception of the family to the year of his arrival and sometimes depicting in the background the ship that brought him across the Atlantic (Figure I.4).[35] These illustrations present a new patriarchal lineage that is temporally and spatially coextensive with the emergent United States. This also works to fold Colonial history into the national past through genealogy, a sort of inheritance in reverse: the English immigrant is retroactively made an American patriarch by his descendants, his life constituting part of a proto-national history by virtue of his offspring's Americanness.

These broadsides bespeak a fervent blood pride among Americans after family crests and other aristocratic trappings had supposedly met their demise in the new republic. The popularity of this practice supports anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli's contention that once genealogy was no longer solely the purview of monarchs and nobles, it actually became "more vital and real to the political order" because it was democratized: "The polity no longer unfolded out of the (fictive) ranked affiliations of the people from the point of view of the sovereign family. Now everyone could have a little heritage of his or her own—diagrammed as a personal tree—a stake in some plot that tracked generationally."[36] This ennobling of every domestic unit granted them the status of both dynasties in miniature and links in a genealogical chain that extended shared "blood" to the boundaries of the population, a process Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein have described as the "nationalization of the family."[37] Consanguinity was something more than a metaphor in the advent of American nationalism, a genealogical concept in which the distinction between biological relation and symbolic national belonging is blurred. Old World genealogical paradigms survived in the nineteenth-century construction of two intimately related macro families: "race" and "nation." Whiteness and Americanness became the privileged identities to which genealogical title must be proven.[38]

Frederick Douglass famously articulated the exclusion of enslaved people and their descendants from the sort of genealogical schema that