**Bloodlines, Kinship**

Hilary A. Short

> Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a pre-determined form to all its vicissitudes. Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents.
>
> —Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History"

> I gave you my *blood*.
>
> —My mother

**Bloodlines**

*Bloodlines* is a 228-inch-long installation made horizontally in Microsoft Excel and then rotated 90 degrees to create a dripping or oozing effect down the wall. It


*Figure 1 Hilary A. Short*, Bloodlines, *2020. Image courtesy of the artist.*

began as an inquiry into naming and the organizational hierarchy of the family tree. The tree serves as a symbol of nature, an inherited organizer used to display relational hierarchies of time and power, enacted subsequently through myriad metaphors. If the medium is the message, the tree is the medium that validates the family as a natural hierarchical entity positioned in linear time. The tree is, and has been, an omnipresent symbol for how we order and understand relationships—

tying together "nature" and "order" in our collective understanding of the family.[1] Contemporary genealogical practices carried out on websites like Ancestry.com uphold hetero status markers of the family vis-à-vis patrilineal threads while privileging records of white lineages. Documents, or "records," serve as archival evidence in this online database—thus archival evidence reflects social ties and social hierarchies. In this way, using Ancestry.com to gather family data and Excel to hold said data is revealing what was always there—the tree as disassociated from, but disingenuously carrying forth, our belief that nature is unquestionable.

To explore other ways to situate relations,[2] I accessed my family "records" through a free trial on Ancestry.com and revisualized them in Excel. Instead of privileging the patrilinear social networks of marriage and children, like in a family tree, year 0 becomes cell A on my Excel spreadsheet, and each filled-in row comes to represent each individual's lifetime. This is then tipped on its side to signal the movement of blood and the ways that the fantasy of documented ancestry often obscures "the accidents, the minute deviations," of the heteropatriarchal family structure.

By taking the family out of the tree, what might we learn about who upholds whom? *Bloodlines* destabilizes the goal of the family tree to organize humans into heteropatriarchal relation with each other. Rather, this visualization confronts the taught desire to rank and categorize—we cannot so easily reduce or deduce humanity into an organized network. *Bloodlines* does not "give" us data.

Passed-down narratives of my family tree are "verified" by Ancestry.com, a business that asks us to "discover" and "explore."[3] But I, as "discoverer" and "explorer," am confined by who has been documented and placed online, and in what ways. I dutifully "collect" my grandparents (born in the 1920s or 1930s) through their certificates of birth and death. The next generation back (born around 1900) instantly becomes harder to locate; perhaps their database resides in Italy. Within these records, my bloodlines dictate my family tree, and my family tree dictates my bloodlines.

In *Bloodlines*, you can see where the bulk of these records lie as they thin out the higher and farther left you go. Dutiful dyads multiplying backward through time reach stasis as people become unavailable to "collect." My own life, released from under the inflexible branch of my parents, typically positioned under them in perpetuity, now begins in column BXL.

The family marks time, or we mark time through family. Our tools for genealogical research, in "the sense of taxonomizing or organizing people into stable relationships with one another,"[4] upholds the fantasy of ancestry even though

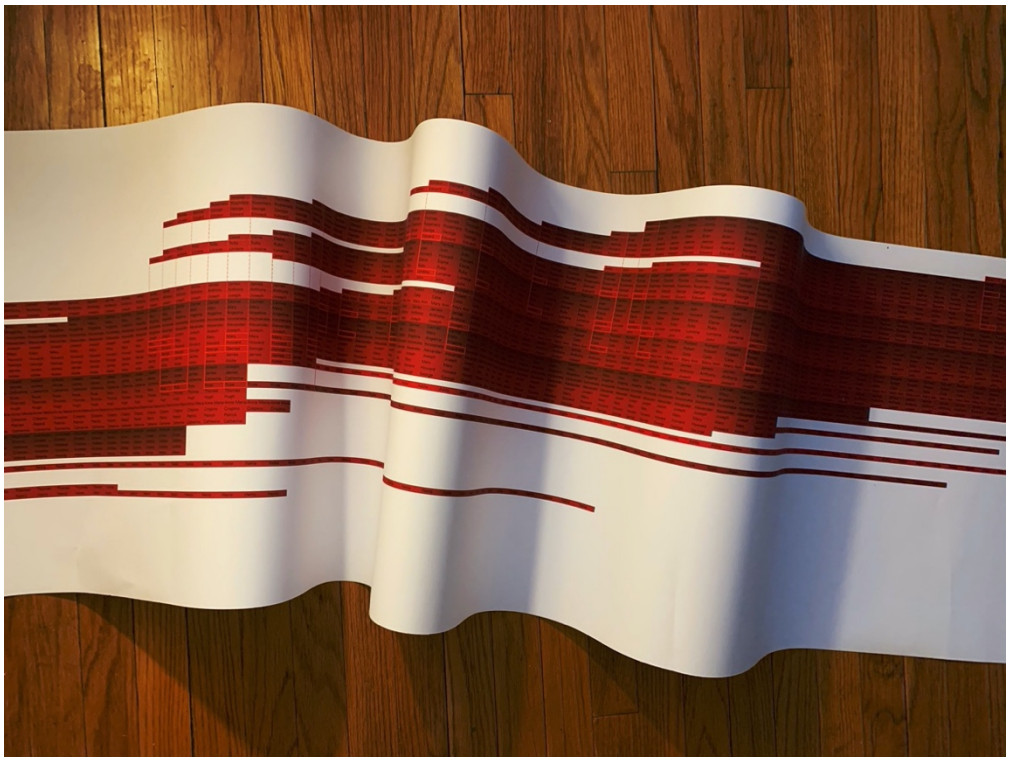

*Figure 2 Hilary A. Short*, Bloodlines *(detail)*, *2020. Image Courtesy of the artist.*

we may know, or have an inkling, that it is not as straightforward as is presented to us. That inkling is left unresolved, and we are left only to wonder.

In *Bloodlines*, the fantasy of ancestry is put on display—the blood drips down the wall as a representation of how we consider this fantasy of time, of family. *Bloodlines* is not an archive. At the same time, the family tree is individualized. All of this blood has been coursing through time to get to me, the "discoverer" of my blood, the "explorer" of my ancestry. And yet, this individualization denies collectivity outside the family unit; kith are not searchable on Ancestry.com. Instead of thinking of our direct "bloodlines" as lineage, why not consider the family "tree" as more of a system that itself has a lineage, passing down heteropatriarchal time as a regulatory marker for our kinship ties?

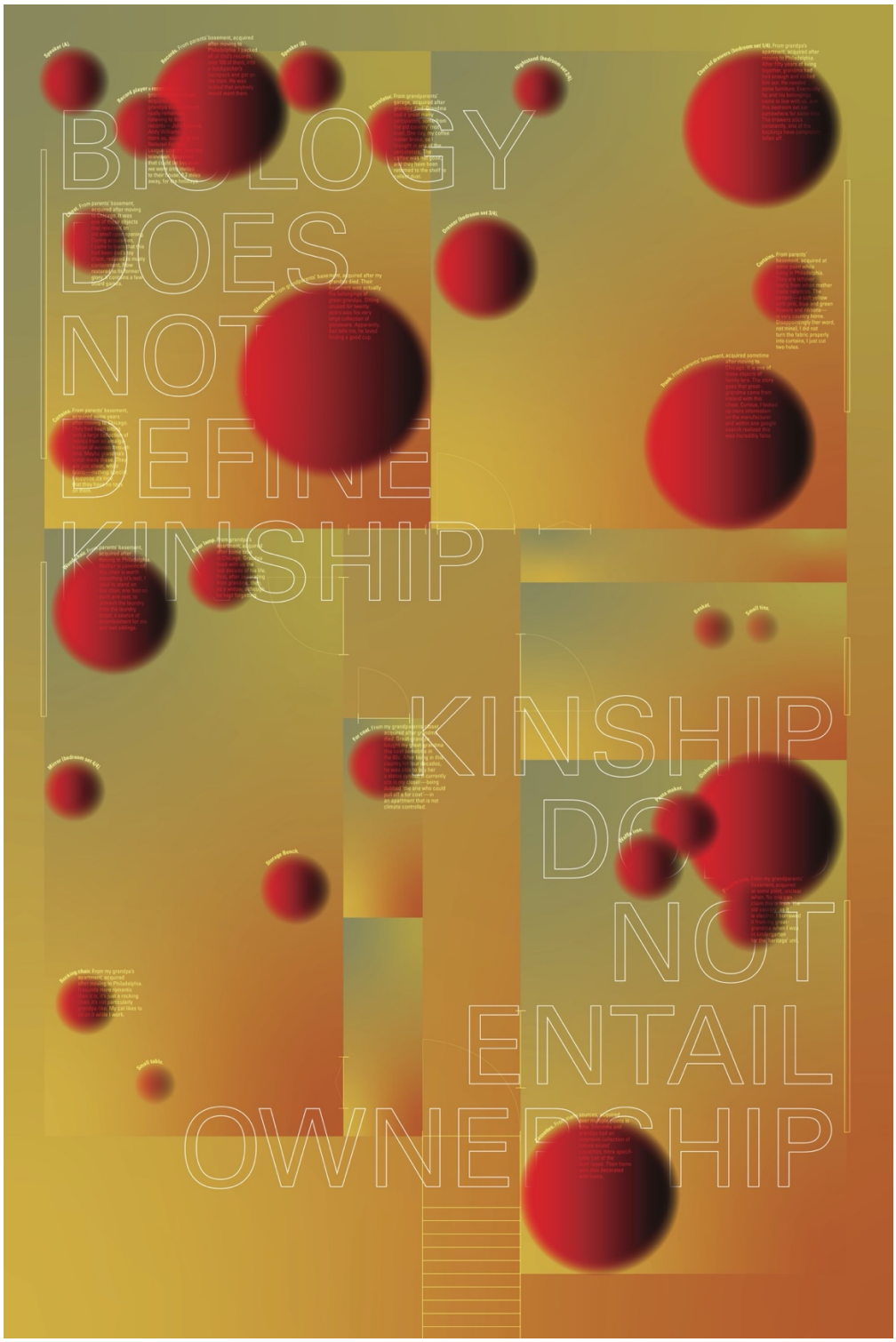


*Figure 3 Hilary A. Short,* Kinship*, 2020. Image Courtesy of the artist.*

**Kinship**

> Kin is a wild category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate. Making kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible. Who lives and who dies, and how, in this kinship rather than that one? What shape is this kinship, where and whom do its lines connect and disconnect, and so what? What must be *cut and what must be tied if multispecies flourishing on earth, including human and other-than-human beings in kinship, are to have a chance?*
>
> —Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*

*Kinship* is an A1 poster depicting "spheres of memories"—memories associated with "inherited" objects—tethered to physical points around my home, which is drawn as a blueprint. Each sphere is surrounded by a fuzziness, as a translation of uncertainty and precarity around truth and knowledge. In *Bloodlines*, the "document" or "record" carries forth the archival evidence of the state. Here, in a domestic space, familial objects take on that role. Emanating from them (the objects) are stories; memories of passed time and past relations, and I am their captive subject. Objects like these are passed down through bloodlines enforcing genetic logics of inheritance and pulling them, discontinuously, into affective and temporal relations between the original owner and the current one.

The system of the blueprint, much like the system of the family tree, functions as a system to systemize systems (and it matters).[5] A blueprint is flat and has a technical language: it defines space and delineates between what is inside (unproductive/family) and what is outside (productive/work). Rather, my apartment walls as represented in *Kinship* are gradations—allowing seepage from one room to the next as well as from the inside to the outside (and vice versa), complicating the legacy of the industrial-age separation that subordinated women in unproductive spaces and condemned them in productive ones. The blueprint is also utilized metaphorically, as something that can be found in one's DNA, in order to fulfill one's destiny. However, our destinies are predetermined by these systems (which systemize systems) that dictate rules and roles.

Atop the blueprint, but behind the "spheres of memories," is the phrase "biology does not define kinship, kinship does not entail ownership."[6] Normalized preferences for biological attachments uphold heteropatriarchy as the ultimate family-forming method. This, in turn, dictates rules of inheritance—ownership is being passed down as well as the object itself. As an inheritor, a family member, I am being given not only the object but the responsibility to preserve biological

definitions of ownership. The phrase (atop the blueprint, behind the spheres) breaks these definitions, opening up a productive space of discomfort in an unproductive space, the domestic space, in order to redefine kinship.

Biological attachments are not neutral. To examine the precarious definition between ownership and object, the objects in my home have been abstracted into disembodied "spheres of memories." Within the blueprint, they remain tethered to the real space in which they physically inhabit. Further, the abstracted emotional space they inhabit is translated through a fuzziness that emanates from them. The fantasy of ancestry is present here as well—I am stuck in imagined relations with previous owners, and I may or may not be able to unstick.[7] Many of these "spheres of memories" are accompanied by the passed-down narratives, which is a part of the inheritance. Unlike genealogical research carried out on Ancestry.com, I alone contain the knowledge and ability to verify this truth. The precarity of my ability to hold (both the abstracted memories and the physical objects) is a direct reflection on my ability as a worthy inheritor.

How might we "trouble" these narratives and attempt to break ourselves from these attachments? To break from these definitions? Can we *un*stick ourselves from these kinship objects? Can we *un*inherit legacies? Whether it is the tree in *Bloodlines* or the blueprint in *Kinship*, the systems that we use to organize our families have their own lineages that regulate our kinship ties. Leaving definitions unresolved and uncomfortable ("bloodlines do not give us data," "bloodlines are not an archive," "biology does not define kinship," "kinship does not entail ownership") opens up possibilities to redefine what has become normalized under the matrix of oppression (settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism). In this space of discomfort, we can begin to reimagine and redefine contemporary kinship beyond biology.

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Notes

[1] See Laboria Cuboniks, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation* (London: Verso, 2018), 15: "Anyone who's been deemed 'unnatural' in the face of reigning biological norms, anyone who's experienced injustices wrought in the name of natural order, will realize that the glorification of 'nature' has nothing to offer us—the queer and trans among us, the differently abled, as well as those who have suffered discrimination due to pregnancy or duties connected to child-rearing. XF is vehemently anti-naturalist. Essentialist naturalism reeks of theology—the sooner it is exorcised, the better."

[2] The shift in definition for "relatives" is what Donna Haraway calls one of her favorite factoids: "'Relatives' in British English were originally 'logical relations' and only became 'family members' in the seventeenth century" (*Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016], 103).

[3] Ancestry.com website, accessed May 21, 2020.

[4] Orit Halpern, *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason since 1945* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 108.

[5] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 101: "It matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts. Mathematically, visually, and narratively, it matters which figures figure figures, which systems systematize systems."

[6] Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism against Family* (London: Verso, 2019).

[7] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 44. "Good and bad feelings accumulate 'around' objects, such that those objects become sticky. Objects become ambivalent in the conversion between negative and positive feeling states: 'happy objects' can become 'unhappy' over time, in the contingency of what happens, which is not to say that their happiness no longer persists as an impression, available as memory."