Expos 20: Family Trees and Family Sagas

The age of Ancestry.com and 23andMe has given people instant access to a wealth of information about their family histories. Census data, birth and death records, and other sources essential to genealogical research have become vastly more accessible, and at the same time, genetic testing has provided radically new ways to learn about one’s ancestry—though scientists are still debating what exactly DNA evidence tells us about our distant forebears. Yet all this information newly at our fingertips means little until shaped into a story of some kind. So how do the facts of ancestry combine with the art of narrative? How do stories about our ancestors affect our sense of who we are as individuals? What happens when newly discovered information about a person’s ancestry disrupts the story that person previously told themselves? And how do family histories intertwine with the great events of history itself, with wars and revolutions, religious persecutions, mass migrations, and legacies of enslavement and colonization? This course is about ancestral stories, and how those stories shape the sense of self of the people who tell them.

We begin, in Unit 1, by studying a classic example of family history raised to the level of art: The Saga of the People of Laxardal. Written down in 1245, this saga tracks several generations of descendants of Unn the Deep-minded, a powerful matriarch who settles in Iceland with her followers at the end of the ninth century. At the core of the saga stands Gudrun, a woman of pride and independence who wreaks terrible vengeance after a feud between brothers causes the death of her beloved. Gudrun’s tragedy captures the cost of blood feud within the family and forms the climax of a saga intensely occupied with questions of genealogy and ancestry. In the Unit 1 essay, you will analyze The Saga of the People of Laxardal, crafting an argument about how the genre of the “family saga” should be defined.

In Unit 2, we shift focus to our contemporary moment, to ask how personal identity is being shaped by family history in the age of the genetic ancestry test. In the Unit 2 essay, you will stake out a position in contemporary debates about genetic ancestry tests and “genealogy TV.” We will watch selected episodes from the PBS series Finding Your Roots, hosted by Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who invites notable Americans to learn about their ancestry on television. The show centers on the reactions of guests as they learn the results of genealogical research and genetic testing, and prominently features discussions of how new knowledge about ancestry affects guests’ sense of personal identity. In writing the Unit 2 essay, you will learn to work with secondary sources. You will read contributions to scholarly debates about the figure of the “inconvenient ancestor” in contemporary genealogy TV, and about the impact of genetic testing on consumers’ racial and ethnic identity. These essays will help you refine your thesis and practice using and citing secondary sources, and will also illustrate how the conventions of academic writing vary across different disciplines.

Finally, in Unit 3 of the course, you will choose your own modern “family saga” to write about (see below for a list of suggested possible topics), developing a research essay that draws on multiple secondary sources in order to situate the work you have chosen within its cultural and historical context. You may propose your own choice of a novel, film, television series, or other work which engages with the themes of family and family history. Possible topics include but are not limited to:
- *Roots* (1976)
- Cristina Garcia, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992)
- The Netflix series *The Crown* (2016–)
- The HBO series *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019)
- The HBO series *Succession* (2018–)

With the assistance of a research librarian, you will locate secondary sources that will enrich your close analysis of the work in question, as you research the author’s biography, the popular and critical reception of the work, and the specific historical experiences with which the work engages: transatlantic slavery, political exile, assimilation, social mobility, queer and alternative family groups—to name just a few themes explored by the above works. Bringing together both aesthetic analysis and historical context, you will craft an argument about what the work you have selected reveals about the significance of ancestral stories in modern society.