

Interview

Jerome de Groot¹

“The Genealogical sublime”: An Interview with Julie Creet

¹ The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK, E-mail: Jerome.Degroot@manchester.ac.uk

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Julie Creet’s *The Genealogical Sublime*, a book about the development of genealogy databases and their effect on genealogical consciousness, is forthcoming from University of Massachusetts Press in February 2020. Jerome de Groot interviewed her about this project and the way the book deals with archives, religion, and the uncanny.

Jerome de Groot [JdG]: How did you come to write about family history in this way?

Julie Creet [JC]: *The Genealogical Sublime* arose out of a very personal turn into the world of family history and archive fever. My search involved all the things that genealogists and family historians say motivate them: the hunt, the feeling that the past will explain something about who we are in the present, the need to fill in the gaps in family narratives, repair traumas, search for relatives, living and dead, and, ultimately, find one’s origins. As I was trying to understand the uncanny pull of the archive – mine were particularly totemic to me as they were mostly in Hungarian, a language I can still barely read – I came across the unsettling story *The Encyclopedia of The Dead (A Whole Life)* by Yugoslavian writer Danilo Kiš.¹ The authors of Kiš’s not-so-imaginary *Encyclopedia* are an “odd caste of erudites” who “believe in the miracle of biblical resurrection, and they complete their vast catalogue in preparation for that moment.” The entries will allow everyone to find “not only his fellow men but also – and more important – his own forgotten past.” Rather than acquiesce to the loss of memory that accompanies that death, and rather than accept the incompleteness of the historical record, Kiš’s story instead fills in all the gaps, exhuming the uncanny nightmare of the living who both fear and long for a complete record of the dead.

In *The Encyclopedia*’s last publication, a long postscript followed, itself a story of an uncanny coincidence and what I am calling the *genealogical sublime*. Kiš links the dreamscape archive of the *Encyclopedia* to the stranger-than-fiction Mormon Archives just outside Salt Lake City. Kiš’s story and its postscript were my introduction to the Granite Mountain Archive that the Mormon Church blasted out of Little Cottonwood Canyon in the 1960s, a vast underground vault which now stores one quarter (and counting) of the world’s genealogical records. My experience in the family history archive had been compulsive and compelling, but clearly, I was only one family historian in a vast uncanny enterprise that promised the dead a path to heaven and resurrection. I began to wonder if my motivations were purely my own or if I was part of a Zeitgeist. My fascination with the Mormon project – its practical, religious, and sublime dimensions – would launch my investigation into the history of the industry as a whole. What most people don’t realize is that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) is at the center of the contemporary industry and has signed agreements with every major database to share records in exchange for family trees that church members can use to posthumously baptize the dead.

JdG: Can you outline your concept of the *genealogical sublime*?

JC: In *The Genealogical Sublime*, I trace the histories of the longest (Confucius), the largest (the LDS Church), the most complete (Iceland), the most lucrative (Ancestry.com) and the most rapidly growing (direct-to-consumer genetic genealogy) genealogical databases, describing a genealogy of genealogy, a history of an industry built on the innate need to know from whence we come. Reconsidered in the light of the activities of the Mormon Church and the database and DNA technologies (including Big Pharma) driving the industry something else emerges – a sublime desire to gather all of the world’s genealogical records and to trace the entire genetic record of the human race. Genealogy lends itself to obsessive completeness because the connections are limitless and new technologies allow us to indulge these obsessions as never before. As each unique case study shows, we are amassing the records of the dead in the interests of life beyond death – a sublime effort of mathematical and mythic reach.

JdG: What are your key arguments in the book?

Jerome de Groot is the corresponding author.
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JC: Contemporary and widespread fascination with genealogy, bordering on obsession, cannot be understood independently of the powerful tools of database technology that aid and abet the search for traces of blood and belonging – and difference. Nor can the popularity of genealogy be understood independently of the lucrative business of providing access to that information, for genealogy has become one of the most marketable uses of genetics and one of the most frequently searched and subscribed subjects online. As the databases grow, individual users become smaller and smaller data points. Paradoxically, we are knowing ourselves as never before in ways that are less and less significant. We erect narrative as a defensive bulwark in the face of statistical insignificance.

JDG: To what extent do you think affect and emotion are important to the family history phenomenon?

JC: In a previous essay about Danilo Kiš's story, I explored the notion of *genealogical truth*.² Pierre Nora complained that family historians were reviving positivism in a way that professional historians had long since abandoned. I argued that something more complicated is going on. I'll quote my essay here since I think it answers what I mean by the *uncanny*:

But, does one really search the genealogical archive in the mode of positivism with the assumption that one will find the "truth of one's origins"? What kind of "truth" about the self does the genealogical archive offer? And how does one enter it? Is not the very notion of "origins" uncanny, straddling as it does the liminal space between life and before life, between life and death? Disavowing positivism, as Nora claims professional historians do, may admit permutations of interpretation, but it does not address the metaphysical nature of the genealogical archive or the uncanny experience of the amateur genealogist who searches there.

My current extension of the idea of uncanny origins is precisely this notion of the *genealogical sublime*, a liminal place between life and death, between the individual and the collective, between the joy of connection and its necessary corollary (often disavowed) that we are less and less significant in the chain of life the more ancestors we accumulate. We are both fascinated and frightened by deep time, a notion of ancestral time afforded by databases and DNA to which we have never had scientific access before.

JDG: To what extent, then, is the technology driving this? How might we study this, and theorize this?

JC: Data has become a religious experience displacing a mystic or metaphysical experience of the great chain of being. Descent is increasingly described as a mathematical formula in deep time that stretches well beyond our capacity to know recent generations of ancestors. Borrowing from Immanuel Kant's *mathematical sublime* and David Nye's *technological sublime*, the phenomenon of locating ourselves in ever-growing databases of ancestors, databases that thrive on the technological and mythical fantasy of completeness, is part of what I see as *the genealogical sublime*.³ How do we locate ourselves between the need for origin stories and the infinite mathematical expansion of relatives – and the recession of origins – delivered to us by new genealogical technologies? I think family historians negotiate these technologies by expanding their searches and their narratives at the same time. The databases offer infinitely expanding relatives and infinitely receding origins, that, paradoxically promise completeness (complete selves, complete family trees, complete records, etc.). The more we know about families, the more we recognize that they are chaotic affairs, that genetically we are all mongrels, that we pick and choose which blood lines to follow. So, which lines do we choose and why? How can we understand origin stories as both narrative constructions of self and defenses against the statistical infinitude of receding origins? The question: "Who do you think you are?" provokes a sense of lack, that we can't know who we are without buying new information about ourselves. But, where does it end? How do we decide that we have enough information? That is a narrative decision that we take in the face of almost infinite relatives and ever-receding origins – which, statistically, belong to everyone else alive as well. In the end, we tell our very personal and emotionally significant family histories in the face of immeasurable greatness and smallness, the vastness of the story of the history of the human genome and our small place in that chain of replication.

Notes

1 Danilo Kiš, *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 38–65, 192–194.

2 Julia Creet, "The Archive and the Uncanny: Danilo Kiš's 'Encyclopedia of the Dead' and the Fantasy of Hypermnnesia," in *Lost in the Archives*, ed. Rebecca Comay, vol. 8 (Toronto: Alphabet City, 2002), 265–75.

3 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Revised edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994). See also Jos de Mul, "The (Bio)Technological Sublime," *Diogenes* 59, no. 1–2 (February 1, 2012): 32–40.