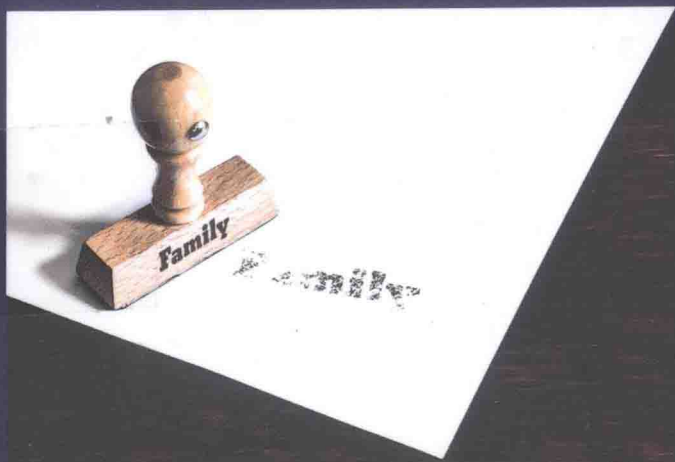


Karolina Golimowska / Reinhard Isensee /
David Rose (eds.)

Family and Kinship in the United States

Cultural Perspectives
on Familial Belonging



PETER LANG
EDITION

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Introduction

In recent years notions of family have come under intense scrutiny from a number of perspectives that are informed by various political, economic, social and cultural agendas both in academic discourse and public debates in Western societies in general and the United States in particular. One of the key reasons for this keen interest in the family derives from the specific functions that it has taken in the formation of the social constitution in Western societies.

At the backdrop of industrialization and the emergence of capitalist states in the 19th century, the family has been elevated to the status of a social institution that not only defines the structural grounding of society as a whole in terms of socio-political, economic and cultural as well as legal organization but that also was to represent a shared value system that serves as an ideological norm for individual orientation. Such a status that postulated both its social and individual significance helped to construct narratives of the family that emphasized its universalist nature and disguised its intricate links to hegemonic norms. Thus narratives of family have been frequently inscribed with specific interests of maintaining the status quo of respective societies disregarding the factual social and economic inequalities that families are embedded in.

In the United States this universalist and normative notion of family has been particularly influenced by constructions of the nuclear family in the media and popular culture in the 1950s that consists of married (heterosexual) parents and their biological (or adopted) children and provides a space for an allegedly happy life and shelter from harsh social realities. As a powerful image of the American family this notion has incorporated myths that draw on key elements of the American national narrative of self-reliance and individual agency and at the same time establishes a normative ideal that has conflicted with the social practice of both family patterns and relationships. It is this confrontation between the prevailing myth of the nuclear family and the shifting contexts of family life that has been at the core of the ongoing controversies about “family” in the U.S. since the late 20th century.

Four social movements in particular have changed the political, social and legal landscape of American family life and strongly contributed to a radical revision of the traditional nuclear family model and its mythical status. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s opened the ground for addressing the social, economic and educational inequalities based on racial discrimination and for implementing legislation that aimed at providing new opportunities for African Americans,

Hispanics and Native Americans to enhance their economic situation as well as those of their families. The Women's Movement, especially since the 1970s, was instrumental in initiating gradual changes in the economic and cultural status of women in terms of profession and education that eventually resulted in shifting perceptions of gender roles outside and inside the family. In the late 1970s the Gay Rights Movement triggered a radical process of re-considering the traditional family model as it questioned the foundational principles of the nuclear family as a heterosexual construct and demanded legal rights pertaining to same-sex marriage and adoption, among others. With a strong focus on marriage itself as a constitutive framework for the family the Marriage Movement of the late 1990s has brought attention to such aspects as obsolete family legislation (changes in divorce laws) and proposed financial initiatives to strengthen the institution of marriage in the face of growing divorce rates and unwed couples.¹

Hence, what these movements have spurred since the 1960s is a continuous and forceful process of undermining long-held premises (and their concomitant promises) of a monolithic notion of family that rested on allegedly stable biological and social constructions. They have also inspired an increasing diversity of family models in the United States that is characterized by new configurations of family arrangements and familial belonging and transgress the boundaries of the nuclear family. However, as the current debates in the U.S. clearly show, these new configurations as alternative, yet not exclusive family models are highly contested by advocates of the traditional family as they see family diversity as a threat to social stability rather than a choice of living in familial arrangements that debunk hegemonial norms of race, class and gender.

Against the backdrop of these controversies about the meanings of family and the realities of family life and familial belonging in the United States since the late 20th century, the volume at hand explores and evaluates representations of family and kinship in recent print and visual texts. More specifically, the contributions inquire how cultural conventions and concepts of the traditional family and family values have gradually shifted in the light of political, economic and cultural reconfigurations in American society and how these shifts have entailed new as well as controversial narratives about family and kinship. As notions of

1 See Pearson Education (2015). *MyFamilyLab: The Changing Family*. Chapter 1, p. 23. Retrieved October 2, 2015 from http://www.pearsonhighered.com/assets/hip/us/hip_us_pearsonhighered/samplechapter/0205735363.pdf. Web.

¹This resource provides a comprehensive introduction into key theoretical aspects pertaining to family concepts as well as the political, social and cultural realities of family life in the United States in a historical perspective.

family have maintained a central place as a conceptual matrix in social, cultural and political as well as pedagogic studies and thus take on specific meanings in the respective disciplinary context, they seem to resist clear-cut, holistic definitions. Therefore, the authors of this volume rather focus on the metonymic quality of family representations in the United States in which “family” serves as a repository not only for radical positions, but also for the validity of concrete experience and social practices as opposed to abstract discourses. Hence they primarily discuss forms and functions of narratives in U.S. American literature and media that convey accounts of family and kinship constructions in an effort to show how these narratives affirm, reproduce, resist, challenge or subvert normative ideas of family life. At the same time they investigate how discourses about family and kinship are employed to communicate and confirm or negotiate constellations of power and in which way they can serve as sites of articulating differences, struggles, alliances, strategic endeavors and innovative conceptualizations of family at various intersections. Finally, considering the relation between “family” and its representations as reciprocal, literature, film, sitcoms, digital sites etc. are being read as not only re-presenting existing family models but also creating them in specific cultural contexts by using different strategies. These representations are then re-produced in the larger society and eventually reflected again on the representational level.

Approaching the topic of family from these premises, the authors address the following key questions: What are the various social and cultural pre-requisites and ramifications of kinship and family membership? How do family and nation relate to on a metaphorical level? How do states regulate sexuality and reproduction through dominant discourses of family and kinship? How relevant are religious ideas and traditions in conceptualizing family constellations? In exploring these issues, the contributions provide readings of fictional texts across various genres. Each pursuing its own particular focus and applying particular methodological approaches that are located in literary and cultural critical theory, sociology, family studies as well as close reading, the individual essays highlight the role cultural production has played in reconfiguring paradigms of family and kinship in the United States.

The volume is divided into four chapters that explore four key themes that have been at the center of the current controversies about family and familial belonging in U.S. American society: normative family models, alternative family models, dysfunctional family models and families of choice. Each of the essays in these chapters takes a closer look at several trajectories of the respective themes providing insights into the coordinates of family models shifting between adhering to

and diverging from the nuclear family norms on the one hand, and the narrative and visual strategies of representing them on the other.

In **Chapter I** **Barbara Antoniazzi** analyzes the intersections between the culture of neo-liberalism and the concept of post-racial America as they emerge in symbolic representations of the black family in the TV sitcom *The Cosby Show*, in the play *King Hedley II* by August Wilson and in Percival Everett's novel *Erasure*. Her discussion is particularly directed at revealing how notions of paternity are informed by discourses of race and post-raciality as well as capital in the post-Civil Rights era and how these discourses are "translated" into visual and literary representations in the selected texts.

Depictions of paternal roles are also at the center of **Newton Freie Murce Filho's** investigation of recent American, Canadian and Brazilian picture books that have been recommended by national institutions in the respective countries. His comparative reading of changing family constellations paying special attention to the role of the father figure in the selected picture books that are anchored in different (national) cultural contexts offers instructive insights into the similarities and dissimilarities concerning family constructions that adhere to normative notions of family on the one hand, and that project alternative family arrangements (e.g. single-parent, extended, same-sex parent, interracial families) on the other.

Taking a different approach to children's books **Ulrike Schneeberg** looks at the motive of monsters in U.S. American picture books as characters and their function in transcending categories of race, gender and age. Her exemplary readings of various texts reveal that rather than projecting images of fear as a pedagogic means of instruction per se, picture books seem to convey hegemonic conventions of gender that privilege white, middle-class boys and suggest specific patterns of behavior that will "make a successful boy."

Chapter II offers interpretations of literary representations of alternative family models as manifestations of "Making New Homes" and thus provides insights into new family arrangements that reflect how notions of the traditional family have been both challenged and expanded to include new constructions of familial belonging. The alternative family models that are discussed here include geographically and symbolically displaced families transgressing normative biological, cultural and linguistic borders.

In her essay **Viola Amato** investigates the function of normative family concepts in current intersex discourses and their role in processes of "normalization" of intersex subjects. Linking Judith Butler's notion of intelligibility with Patricia Hill Collins's critique of the gender norms of the nuclear family, she discusses major aspects of the hegemonic postulations about intersex as well as medico-cultural

practices that are derived from normative ideas of the family and finally looks at strategies of resisting normative ideals of family reproduction and of producing intersex intelligibility as alternative familial spaces.

Rebecca Schäfer scrutinizes discourses of motherhood and family in the context of current pop music culture by exploring pop singer and performance artist Lady Gaga's rhetoric of "Mother Monster" at the backdrop of the current cultural (U.S. American) debates on the obsession with motherhood and momism in the post-feminist era. A closer look at the motherhood narratives that Lady Gaga employs in addressing her audience at concerts and her followers in Social Network Sites reveals that while these narratives project the dominant cultural dichotomies of the archaic mother/angelic motherhood versus the evil mother/the monstrous maternal they still privilege the latter as the dominant image of Lady Gaga's own perception of motherhood.

Karolina Golimowska revisits post-9/11 novels as representations of family constructions that link the city of New York to notions of family and home. By reading the family at the backdrop of the metropolis as both a symbolic and actual place of re-imagining familial and communal belonging in the aftermath of 9/11, the selected texts offer insights into the significance of (re-)building family structures both for the individual and community in the face of turmoil and crisis. The discussion of the selected texts, and the analysis of Masha Hamilton's *31 Hours* in particular, clearly demonstrates the close parallels between family and city in constructing and experiencing familial belonging as home.

"Broken Homes and Empty Houses" as representations of dysfunctional families and family dystopias are in the center of attention in the four essays in **Chapter III**. Looking at dystopian versions of childhood, innocence and vulnerability in *Never Let Me Go* (2006) by Kazuro Ishiguro, **Sonja Schillings** investigates the broader question of how the novel narrates resistance against oppression that is depicted in the plot as an intervention into (dystopian) societal norms. The raising of clones as donors of human organs for "normal" society in a secluded boarding school is established as the ethical dilemma in the novel for seeking productive ways of articulating resistance and gaining agency in a society that de-humanizes specific groups of people. As the analysis shows, the key to achieving a voice in this struggle is not so much provided through the plot events of the novel but rather on the narrative level, represented by the protagonist Kathy. Her questioning of the political and social context of her own life leads to a vision of a larger clone community that defies normative constructions of childhood and familial bonds on the grounds of notions of Enlightenment education and traditions of African American institutional history.

In her close reading of two novels by Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008), **Agnieszka Styła** explores the construction of family roles and narrative strategies in a fictional context that heavily draws on biblical references. Claiming that Robinson transforms rather than follows biblical patterns in her fictional portrayal of the Prodigal Son parable, the comparative analysis points to the shifts and inconsistencies in the familial roles assigned to the characters in the two novels as well as to the narrative strategies that endorse modifications from the original Prodigal Son parable of the Bible.

Benjamin Betka's essay addresses notions of family and home by investigating functions, forms and traditions of Halloween as an U.S. American cultural institution and phenomenon of mass consumption. His discussion of the movies *Psycho* and *Last House on the Left* as well as the novel *Demon Theory* and the graphic novel *Black Hole* considers the genre of the "slasher" as the foundational source feeding a tradition of mass cultural practices that re-define normative concepts of family and home in a twofold way. While family and home are equated with images of protection, affection and stability on the one hand, they are connoted with fear, struggle and fragility on the other.

In the last contribution to this chapter **Stefan Hippler** provides a reading of family models in Michael Cunningham's family saga *Flesh and Blood* (1995) against the backdrop of the recent controversial public and academic debates about the "crisis of the nuclear family" and about new conceptualizations of family. Focusing on the different forms and functions of family models in the novel, the discussion highlights not only the various challenges to the idea of the traditional nuclear family but also the resilience of this idea as a paradigm of familial bonding. Hence Cunningham's narrative offers a critical reconsideration of family concepts that does not render the biological or nuclear family per se obsolete but stresses its relevance in contemporary society despite its shortcomings and the presence of competing family models.

Whereas two of the essays in **Chapter IV** look at versions of family constructions that are shaped by forces that transgress the boundaries of the family as the smallest unit of bonding in an effort to explain the role of "Community as Family of Choice" as an alternative formation of kinship, the third essay discusses the narrative function of place and space as a topos of imagining family constellations.

In her analysis of Toni Morrison's novel *Home* (2012) **Silvia Chirila** examines notions of kinship as performativity grounded in individual rituals of communal belonging. Drawing on the theoretical figures of performativity (Judith Butler) and habitus (Pierre Bourdieu), among others, the discussion of the novel emphasizes the impact of the community on constructions of individual identity as anchored