

ANDREA CAROSSO and EVA-SABINE ZEHELEIN

# INTRODUCTION

“Family” has a biological definition as well as a socio-historical/cultural context, for instance in the sense of imagined communities and/or communities of belonging. Families are part of socio-legal constructs, larger cultural collective networks, and body politics: families thus matter.

The lived reality called “family” has never been a monolithic stable entity, but always in flux, adapting to changing circumstances, desires and demands. It is also a crystallization point of social constructions of difference. The stereotype of the traditional “nuclear family,” determined by both biological as well as gender essentialism and heteronormativity, has stuck like scotch-tape as an omnipresent ideal and trope. Consisting of a white person identifying as a man called “father,” a white person identifying as a woman called “mother” and their mutual genetic offspring called “children” (biological essentialism), who follow prescribed performative parenting roles (gender essentialism), the “nuclear family” was, if at all, an exceedingly short-lived representative social phenomenon of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Over the last decades the “nuclear family” has been challenged by the contexts and ways in which people are living and loving today. Families can be pluripaternal and ethnically diverse (patchwork and mixed race partnership), monopaternal (and single mothers by choice / “SMCs”), with same sex partners and/or children who are not genetically related: next to adoption and foster parenting, now gestational surrogacy and Assisted Reproductive Technologies (such as IVF and ICSI) are pathways to family formations of all kinds. All these and more constellations are ubiquitous lived realities; *Modern Family* and *Transparent* clash with *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. Family is a constitutive element of all social, cultural, political, legal, ethical, historical and ethnic fabrics and its study is therefore transcultural as well as multidisciplinary, often controversial and always necessary for the formulation of policies and practices, but also for the understanding of what happens to us, how our world develops, what our

dominant discourses are, how the general catalogue of values and norms is fashioned and how we will proceed further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In this Focus section, we offer eleven contributions from Italian and German scholars that shed light on a number of “family matters” as they are (re)presented in cultural texts as varied as novel, short story, TV-series, memoir and print advertisement.

The issue opens with **Andrea Carosso**’s analysis of the nuclear family during the “Long 1950s” serving as both bedrock of Cold War consensus as well as cog in the wheel of Cold War imperatives. Carosso draws on a plethora of cultural texts to show how the private white, middle-class, bi-generational nuclear family was employed for national Cold War rhetoric, celebrating “family togetherness” in a “happy home corporation,” a revival of the separate spheres ideology, which found its geo-physical manifestation in (homogenous, uniform, and red-lined) suburban living. At the same time, as Carosso illustrates, centripetal forces were tearing at the rhetoric – more women entered the workforce and thus denied the homemaker ideal, sexual mores changed and the Kinsey reports brought to the surface that Americans had for a long time practiced more than had been preached. Popular culture narratives as well as live realities resisted the Cold War idea of containment as projected onto society through the nuclear family ideal.

**Isabel Heinemann** examines how representations of the nuclear family have changed in media advertising to sell products and to convey certain images of “modernity” and “consumerism” – especially since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – and in so doing contributes to addressing a gap in the historical scholarship on large-circulation magazines in the U.S., which remains relatively scarce. The essay analyzes how popular magazines such as *Time*, *Life*, and *Good Housekeeping* used images of the so-perceived “modern family” to attract consumers and gain acceptance for their products, and how notions of the family and the embedded gender norms changed (or were preserved or reaffirmed) in the course of the social transformations of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The articles by Sattler, Balestrino and Zehelein focus on an *à la mode* literary genre, namely the memoir. The individual lenses and objects of study are quite different from each other, though. **Julia Sattler** highlights mixed race memoirs of the 1990s and early 2000s as sites of contestation of the mono-racial family ideal. She argues that memoirs such as Neil Henry’s *Pearl’s Secret* (2001) or Shirlee Taylor Haizlip’s *The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White* (1994) place race mixing at the core of the family as well as of the national story, yet instead of re-writing American history through their family stories revert to (white) American forms of genealogical storytelling in which passing or the American Dream feature prominently. **Alice Balestrino** provides a close reading of Michael Chabon’s memoir-novel *Moonglow* (2016) as a Holocaust narrative which explores the entity of the family as a space of memory repository and – drawing on Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” – as “time-space of trans-generational transmission

of traumatic memories.” And **Eva-Sabine Zehelein** puts the spotlight on a relatively new form of family formation, namely one based on gestational surrogacy. In her article, she analyzes three memoirs written by women who have employed another woman to carry their genetically related child (which she labels “IP memoirs” (IP short for Intended Parents)). Zehelein conceptualizes the genre that is framed by an extraordinary force field as situated at the intersections of personal trauma narrative, autopathography and matriography, scriptotherapy and biography.

Surrogacy also features prominently in **Barbara Miceli**’s article on Margaret Atwood’s novel-turned TV-series *The Handmaid’s Tale*. She embeds her close reading of the novel (and some episodes of the TV-series) in references to the American moment in which the TV-series has ruffled so many feathers and which Atwood must have foreseen already in the 1980s. During a year when “covfefe” tweeted by the American President was a major news story for about one fine day in May, Margaret Atwood was awarded the Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels (The Peace Prize of the German Book Trade). In her acceptance speech, Atwood lifted her lantern to some aspects of the “strange historical moment” we are living through. Today, Atwood observed, *The Handmaid’s Tale* “no longer seems like a far-fetched dystopian fantasy. It has become too real. Red-clad figures are appearing in state legislatures in silent protest at the laws being enacted there, largely by men, to control women. Their aim seems to be to push back the clock, to the nineteenth century if possible.”<sup>1</sup> The world of Gilead, as Miceli shows and warns us, combats dramatically shrunk fertility rates by a totalitarian patriarchal regime which disenfranchises all women and forces the fertile women into sex-based slavery aimed at traditional surrogacy arrangements for the procreation of society.

**Marion Gymnich**, too, looks at dystopian fiction and traces a sweeping, long line from Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) via Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005) to Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), and then to the AMC series *The Walking Dead* (2010-). Gymnich argues that whereas Huxley sketches a world in which family as a social construction has become entirely obsolete on the basis of a “pseudo-Freudian anti-family ideology,” in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century texts the nuclear family model or a form of tribal community is more often than not reaffirmed in dystopian or (post)apocalyptic narrative texts and the nuclear family ideal can stand *pars pro toto* for a world lost and/or destroyed (e.g. in *Never Let Me Go* and *The Road*).

**Stefano Morello** focuses on a TV-series, namely the teen-drama *The O.C.* He argues that the show breaks with its purported genre by placing nearly equal emphasis on both teenagers and their adult parents. Since adults act as positive and negative role models in the show, the series ends up being a cautionary tale for its young viewers. Moreover,

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Atwood, “Stories in the World. Acceptance Speech,” <http://www.friedenspreis-des-deutschen-buchhandels.de/1245413/> (2017).

Morello proposes that subplots revolving around parents allow the showrunner to broaden the potential audience of the series, by targeting adults in addition to teen viewers, and that, as most of the show's characters – parents and children alike – engage in youthful behavior, the series also seems to promote and perpetuate what sociologist Marcel Danesi has defined as the “Forever Young Syndrome” – a kind of society where the generational gap is almost nonexistent and adults systematically behave, and inevitably consume, like teenagers.

While **Fiorenzo Iuliano**'s contribution highlights the concept of chastity in Sherwood Anderson's short story collection *The Triumph of the Egg*, arguing that chastity is a “symbolic site of sexual insubordination” challenging (sexual) norms epistemologically as well as sociologically, and overthrowing roles and norms of the nuclear family, masculinity and fatherhood, **Virginia Pignagnoli**'s article focusses on three recent autofictional narratives that through both form and content defy maternal and gender roles (the “good mother” as “intensive mother” paradigm) as well as notions of heteronormativity in their depictions of family making. All three – Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015), Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* (2015) and Heidi Julavits's *The Folded Clock: A Diary* (2015) – represent motherhood as a “transformative, all-encompassing and bodily experience” and, as Pignagnoli shows, tell stories “that are as unfinished, raw, fluid, contradictory, and vulnerable as the subjects they portray.”

**Sonia Di Loreto** closes this issue by turning to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in an essay that examines the status of various forms of affiliation and adoption narratives and practices as depicted in some early American texts, at a time when different ideas about kinship, and a multitude of possibilities of affiliation were acceptable in the context of the American household and family. As the study of adoption in American culture has been a flourishing area of investigation in the larger horizon of American Studies, the essay investigates Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie; or the Early Times in the Massachusetts* (1827) and other later nineteenth-century tales as a useful testing ground for thinking about kin terms, kinship relations, and forms of affiliation and adoption, especially with regards to inter-ethnic interactions with Native Americans and to the presence of black children and especially black orphans in the Northern states.