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Dissertation Proposal

### **FAMILY MATTERS: DOMESTIC VIOLATIONS AND CIVIC KINSHIP**

This dissertation will analyze family configurations that are marked as marginal or unlawful in relation to nationhood, identity and citizenship in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American literature. Postbellum literary and cultural products that feature transgressions involving kinship boundaries were traditionally overlooked or read in aesthetic or psychological terms. More recently, scholars have examined these works in terms of race, class, gender and religion tensions. However, a study that places the family unit at its center offers a deeper understanding of the representational interplay among kinship practices that contradict the socially constructed norms of the white, middle-class American family during this era, namely polygamy, miscegenation, and incest. The nuclear family unit is the common denominator around which the United States organizes marriage, reproduction, and succession and through which the nation polices legal, political and social activities. If a certain paradigm of the family is perceived as the guardian of postbellum American national morality (Grossberg 3), then paradigm shifts not only reflect dissension in the cultural landscape, but also jeopardize the effort to create a stable and unified American identity, consequently undermining civil cohesion in the fragmented post-Reconstruction nation.

Beginning in 1877 with the conclusion of Reconstruction and ending in 1917 with the beginning of World War I, this dissertation will draw from novels, short stories, plays, and periodicals to analyze how literary products that include uncertain kinship practices respond to national configurations of family. Certain texts of this era are troubled with questions of kinship in terms of race, class, gender and religion. Their responses can be read as attempts to test conventional limits as well as establish meaningful boundaries. I will investigate how these representations respond to larger cultural anxieties over the perceived disintegration of the middle-class, white family as a result of shifting roles and alternative demographic patterns; how such literature imagines the female body as the linchpin for this struggle; how these models reveal the complex negotiation of citizenship and identity after the Civil War; and the extent to which the expression of these transgressions allows for their transformation, reintegration, or expulsion. In the end, this study's significance will rest in its contribution to a broader scholarly understanding of the textual interactions among distinctive kinship configurations and their close relationship to identity, citizenship, and nation-building, together with deeper

insight into the socially constructed historical and literary forms that undergird kinship norms. A complex awareness of these past pressures has ramifications for understanding contemporary notions of American family, identity, and nation.

## **1. THE POSTBELLUM AMERICAN FAMILY: KINSHIP, MARGINALITY, AND IDENTITY**

The first chapter will introduce the historical, social and legal background of the family in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, as well as methodologies of approach. My framework will include relevant cultural and feminist theories, including those set forth by Michael Foucault, Etienne Balibar, Judith Butler, Antonio Gramsci, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In order to frame my discussion of middle-class domestic concerns, I will refer to the work of Stewart Blumin, Michael Gilmore, Amy Kaplan, and Shawn Michelle Smith. Historians Stephanie Coontz, Michael Grossberg, Linda K. Kerber, T. J. Jackson Lears, Alan Trachtenberg and Karen Haltunnen will provide background for the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. My theoretical emphases will reflect cultural studies and new historicist influences, with particular concern for the web of interrelations among race, class and gender. I will explore the historical background of changing notions of family in relation to citizenship, identity and political values in order to delineate how kinship boundaries perceived as natural align with personal identifications such as race, class, gender and religion. In addition to providing historically specific definitions of terms such as family and kinship, I will investigate socially constructed concepts of legality, marginality and criminality that relate to the family, such as polygamy, miscegenation and incest. To illustrate public fears over family disintegration, I may discuss historical and fictional accounts of family-centered violence including responses to the infamous Lizzie Borden murder trial (1892) and Susan Glaspell's play "Trifles" (1916), both of which challenge national sensibility through suspected familial homicide and reflect an urgent desire to account for cultural anomalies. The policing of certain kinship behaviors occurs within a matrix of national anxiety, a process that emphasizes the exclusivity of certain family identities and the fragility of the narrow nuclear ideal. Such concerns may respond to postbellum alterations in gender roles and race and class relations, cultural changes that destabilized family dynamics. After the Civil War, Smith suggests that middle class concerns gradually shifted from gender to race so that the white female body became imbued with a racialized, nationalistic destiny that "transformed the sentimental bonds of the middle-class family into a web of racialized hereditary relations" (6). While Smith's focus is on

visual culture, it is my observation that this paradigm recurs in struggles over transgressive kinship and the questions such struggles raise over identity, belonging and family. These anxieties may also react to the growing diversity of the American citizenry through immigration, emancipation and religious freedom. Consequently, this chapter will allow the multifaceted character of American family and kinship norms to be understood not as essential, natural forms, but rather as naturalized, socially constructed units that are intimately tied to politically-based ideologies of nationhood.

## **2. CRIMINAL SENSATIONS: MORMON POLYGAMY AND KINSHIP**

In the second chapter, I will turn to the intersection between religion and kinship when I assess A.J. Switzer's anti-polygamy novel *Elder Northfield's Home* (1882) and Zane Grey's enormously popular western *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1910). Since the practice of polygamy in the Mormon Church radically departed from traditional Protestant ideologies of monogamy and the nuclear ideal during this period, its popular representation as a criminal, immoral or fanatical activity articulates fears over the collapse of cultural norms. Further, the denial of Utah statehood until six years after plural marriage was officially discontinued, signals a wholesale federal effort to nationalize family values that climaxed in the return of former practitioners to the American family in 1894, when presidential pardons restored their lost rights. With this in mind, I will argue that in both *Northfield* and *Riders*, anxiety over kinship and nationalism centers precisely in middle-class domestic concerns in the form of the white female body. In both novels, the heroine's rejection of an alternative, polygamous family structure is explicitly tied to a normative Protestant discourse of white American ideals that "holds the kinship line." Marion and Mayon Northfield's struggles to overcome polygamy are framed within an explicit language that imagines the home as a miniature nation and the sanctity of womanhood as central to that role. In *Riders*, Jane Withersteen's adherence to gendered ideological conventions leads her to reject plural marriage, a refusal that seems to promise genealogical renewal. Both texts use the prism of religion to draw a connection between nation and family. Each prescribes conduct that cleanses the citizenry of a practice that is perceived as illegal and immoral and links future national vitality to a return to traditional models of family embedded in monogamy.

## **3. BLOOD TELLS: KINSHIP, RACE AND SCIENCE IN TWAIN**

My third chapter will investigate the suggested violation of the family through race. To that end, I will consider miscegenation and its links to citizenship and scientific racism in Mark Twain's complex novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), with reference to Kate Chopin's short story "Desiree's Baby" (1892). Twain's novel complicates discourses of citizenship and languages of blood purity advanced in works such as Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* (1905). When family boundaries are threatened by racial difference, the novel conveys the white rejection of black kinship as well as the disenfranchisement associated with what Patton calls the "kinlessness" of slavery. The figure of the mulatta slave Roxy both subverts and affirms middle-class genealogy while claiming the privileges of white womanhood and citizenship. Her conduct leads to an impossible quandary of blood, kin, privilege and race that reveals the poisonous results of racism through the hero's obsession with scientific truth. Yet, at the same time, the novel reveals the transcendent, but doomed, possibility of claiming that kinship through Roxy's struggle to redefine family and belonging in terms of race and national sensibility. Twain also uses science to question eugenic languages of blood purity and national destiny. Ultimately, the novel probes the fear of domestic violation raised by the intersection of family, race, and science.

#### **4. FAMILY TIES: MISCEGENATION AND THE MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY IN CHESNUTT**

The fourth chapter will examine miscegenation within the context of postbellum class concerns when I consider its relationship to property, succession and the middle-class family in Charles A. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). This novel is concerned with tension over interracial family ties and the class and economic consequences that follow from social practices. Like Twain, Chesnutt reverses languages of blood purity while questioning the limits of American citizenship. Unlike Twain, Chesnutt links the rise of a black middle class to a legitimate American citizenship and claims an equal place for black subjectivity. The white matriarch Olivia's denial of family connection to her biracial half-sister Janet reveals the social construction of kinship and the ramifications of such familial rejection, particularly in relation to property. Chesnutt borrows from class and gender ideologies to query racial and familial boundaries and recasts Janet in the mode of the white, middle-class heroine. Chesnutt's text also shifts the paradigm of white womanhood by reimagining Janet as the moral center of the novel. I will also argue that Chesnutt intertwines national ideology with racial discourse to question the cultural obsession with policing blood boundaries. In the end, *The Marrow of*

*Tradition* demands legitimate citizenship for the black, middle-class family just as the novel insists on that family's contributions to American national identity.

## 5. BLOOD IS THICKER THAN WATER: INCEST, ILLNESS AND KINSHIP IN HOPKINS

In my fifth chapter, I will consider incest and illness in Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood* (1902). This novel explicitly thematizes denaturalized mixtures, disease, blood and the maintenance of clear family boundaries within a transnational context. Hopkins offers an alternative genealogy to white, middle-class womanhood through the American biracial singer, Dianthe, and the African queen, Candace. Although Dianthe commits suicide after she discovers not only that she has married both her brothers but also that they all share "black blood", she and Candace are reimagined by Hopkins within the national and human family. *Of One Blood* serves as a watershed in the question of kinship and nationality by suggesting both the ruin of the American family tree and the promise of a new Pan-African lineage through the union of Reuel and Candace. It offers a blood model that is pure in character, not soiled by a history of wrongdoing. The novel also casts doubt on the sanctity of white womanhood through complicity in black female exploitation. By reimagining kinship on an international stage, Hopkins offers a broad model that departs from the socially constructed norm and emphasizes character and sensibility over race and privilege. In order to demonstrate the enormous anxiety incest creates, I may briefly refer to Edith Wharton's novel *Ethan Frome* as well as the Army's notorious incest trial of 1875. At the end of this chapter, I will link concerns over incest back to *Elder Northfield's Home* and *Riders of the Purple Sage*, where the incest trope intersects with anxiety over polygamy as well.

## 6. ALL IN THE FAMILY: CONCLUSIONS DRAWN ON NATIONAL SENSIBILITY

In closing, I will reiterate each chapter's individual arguments and then draw global connections among them. Each text enters into complex debates over social reorganization and governance. The response to domestic violations within local and national families redefines cultural expectations for conduct through the interrogation of national codes of citizenship embedded in race, gender and religion. This dissertation will recognize the socially constructed roots of the family in order to emphasize naturalized assumptions about American citizenship and identity. A century or more after the Progressive era, the continuing investigation into the literary and historical negotiation of family matters is a reminder of their urgency and relevance.

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