Representing the Contemporary North American Family

Representing the Contemporary North American Family:

Family Portraits

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

PORTRAYING CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICAN FAMILIES

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The 1960s and 70s marked a turning point in the evolution of the family. Major sociocultural changes undermined certain patterns of gender roles around which traditional families, and North American society at large, were organized. When the Food and Drug Administration approved the first oral contraceptive in 1960 and the US Supreme Court ruled in favor of legal abortion in the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, American women were given the right to break free from the normative gendered imperatives of the traditional family. In 1969, the adoption of Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau's reform of the criminal code also paved the way for the liberalization of sexual behaviors, since it decriminalized "non-natural" sexual acts–all non-reproductive homosexual or heterosexual acts–the sale of contraceptives, and abortion.[1] The median age for first marriage for women in the United States was 20.2 in 1953, and rose to 27.8 in 2019 (this was 22.8 to 29.9 for American men).[2] Because the cult of domesticity gradually declined, and the 1970s recession imposed the necessity to move from single-income to dual-income families, an unprecedented number of women–wives and mothers included–joined the workforce in the 1970s. In Canada, 28.9 percent of women aged twenty-five to fifty-four were in the

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[1] Trudeau's criminal reform only partially lifted the ban on abortion, making it legal for women to get the procedure if a committee of three doctors felt the pregnancy endangered the mental, emotional, or physical wellbeing of the mother. Inducing an abortion without the approval of this medical committee remained a crime in Canada until 1988 when the Supreme Court struck down the law as unconstitutional in *R. v. Morgentaler*, leaving the country with no abortion law.

[2] US Census Bureau, "Median Age at First Marriage: 1890 to Present," *Decennial Censuses, 1890 to 1940, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1947 to 2019.*

workforce in 1960, rising to 82 percent in 2015.[3] In the United States, 37.7 percent of all women participated in the labor force in 1960, compared to 57.1 percent in 2018.[4] At the same moment, new legal developments in family law also caused a major upheaval in North American family structures. In Canada, the 1968 Divorce Act made it possible for spouses to obtain a divorce after three years of separation, or earlier in cases of matrimonial offenses such as adultery or cruelty. This was immediately reflected in socio-demographic indicators, with the Canadian divorce rate doubling the very year the law was enforced. In the United States, where divorce is the responsibility of the states and not the federal government, California was the first state to introduce a no-fault divorce procedure in 1970.

In the aftermath of all these social, economic, and legal changes that caused a shift in social values, new family behaviors emerged. The rise of divorces and remarriages, decrease in the birthrate, and delaying of marriage and parenthood have delineated new family forms. Married couples still represented the majority of couples in the 2016 Canadian census, yet common-law unions were rapidly growing and were more than three times the share in 1981 (unmarried couples accounted for 21.3 percent of all Canadian couples in 2016, up from 6.3 percent in 1981).[5] In Canada, for the first time in 2016, one-person households became the most common type of household, outnumbering couples with children. While married couples with children used to be the norm–and allowed for an easy definition of family–they now coexist with single-parent, blended, and homoparental families, unmarried partners or parents, and childless couples. These new realities are blurring the definitions and images of the family, so much so that a lexical evolution has necessarily ensued. In a reflection of the changes that have occurred over the past forty years, concepts like "living apart together" or "three-parent families" have started to spread in order to define new family forms.

This diversification of family patterns has fueled sociological research on the family, some of which is clearly marked by changes and the loss of reference points, according to their titles: *The Family in Crisis* by Conway

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[3] Statistics Canada, "Women in Canada: a Gendered-Based Statistical Report. Seventh Edition," 2017.

[4] US Department of Labor, "Women in the Labor Force: A Databook," December 2019.

[5] Statistics Canada, "Families, Households and Marital Status: Key Results from the 2016 Census," *The Daily* (August 2017), https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/daily-quotidien/170802/dq170802a-eng.pdf?st=H2J01ZOn.

(2003),[6] *Families: Changing Trends in Canada* edited by Maureen Baker (2009),[7] David Popenoe's "American Family Decline, 1960-1990," 1993)[8] *La Fin de la famille moderne: signification des transformations contemporaines de la famille by* Daniel Dagenais (2000), and *La Famille désinstituée* by Marie-Blanche Tahon (1995).[9] The definition of family, and the identification of its evolutions, has long been a topic for scholars, and the 1950s in the United States already had its share of family observers. While Margaret Mead[10] presented a snapshot of the traditional family in her 1948 article "The Contemporary American Family as an Anthropologist Sees It," "The Family as a Universal Culture Pattern" by Guy L. Brown (1948)[11] and *The Family: From Institution to Companionship* by Ernest W. Burgess (1945)[12] placed this institution in a context of constant evolution of norms and culture. In 1949, George Murdock defined the family as "a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction." He added that this group "includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults."[13] This functionalist approach toward the family was then theorized in 1955 by Talcott Parsons and Robert F. Bales, who validated the gendered role division as an organizational mode for the family and society. Decades later, faced with

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[6] John F. Conway, *The Family in Crisis* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 2003).

[7] Maureen Baker (ed.), *Families: Changing Trends in Canada* (Toronto, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 2009).

[8] In this article, supporting traditional family, Popenoe laments contemporary family evolutions, which he identifies as a threat to American society. David Popenoe, "American Family Decline, 1960–1990," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 55, No. 3 (1993): 539.

[9] These titles in French could be translated as *The End of the Modern Family: The Meaning of Contemporary Family Transformations* and *The Deinstitutionalized Family.* Daniel Dagenais, *La fin de la famille moderne: signification des transformations contemporaines de la famille* (Sainte-Foy: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2000); Marie-Blanche Tahon, *La famille désinstituée: introduction à la sociologie de la famille* (Ottawa: Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1995).

[10] Margaret Mead, "The Contemporary American Family as an Anthropologist Sees It," *The American Journal of Sociology* 53, No. 6 (1948): 453–459.

[11] L. Guy Brown, "The Family as a Universal Culture Pattern," *The American Journal of Sociology* 53, No. 6 (1948): 460–463.

[12] Ernest W. Burgess, "The Family in a Changing Society," *The American Journal of Sociology* 53, No. 6 (1948): 417-422.

[13] Quoted in Diana Gittins, "The Family in Question: What Is the Family? Is It Universal?" in *Shifting the Center: Understanding Contemporary Families*, ed. Susan Ferguson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 7.

the narrowness of this approach and its inability to define today's families, contemporary sociologists broadened the definition of family by using less structural criteria. For instance, François de Singly, relying on Durkheim's "marital" family, asserts that the modern family is characterized by its emphasis on the individual and constant attention to the quality of family ties. In opposition to the well-defined norms on which the so-called traditional family rests–the unbreakable and mandatory nature of procreative marriage and the differentiated distribution of gender roles, which results in a division of the private and public spheres–De Singly focuses on the "vagueness" that surrounds the recent evolutions of the family: "The contemporary family exists less according to formal criteria than in reference to a double requirement: the creation of a living environment where everyone can develop while taking part in a common work."[14]

The reason why family is under such scrutiny may be that, however intimate it appears, it is nonetheless a fundamental, even founding component of society. According to conservative historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, family is nothing less than the "bedrock of society" since it turns individuals into civilized, social, and moral beings.[15] Sociologist Elaine Tyler May goes further, and argues that family plays a particular role in the United States since the country had to be created and was thus devoid of institutions guaranteeing social order and a sense of identity that other countries may have found in aristocracy, common traditions, and customs rooted in the history of the national soil:

> Lacking those characteristics, the United States invented its own traditions, and placed the family in the center of the polity, as the institution where citizens are bred and nurtured. Believing in the rights of the individual, but fearful of tyranny from above as well as anarchy from below, the nation's founders invested in the institution of the family the responsibility for maintaining social order in the democracy.[16]

Consequently, with the loss of momentum of the traditional family–marriage being deinstitutionalized, according to Cherlin–and the

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[14] François De Singly, *Sociologie de la famille contemporaine* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), 7–8. Original text in French: "[l]a famille contemporaine existe moins en fonction de critères formels qu'en référence à une double exigence: la création d'un cadre de vie où chacun peut se développer tout en participant à une œuvre commune."

[15] Gertrude Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001).

[16] Elaine Tyler May, "'Family Values': The Uses and Abuses of American Family History," *Revue Française d'Études Américaines*, No. 97 (September 2003): 11.

diversification of family patterns, it is not family that needs redefining but the functioning of North American norms and societies altogether:

> By deinstitutionalization I mean the weakening of the social norms that define people's behavior in a social institution such as marriage. In times of social stability, the taken-for-granted nature of norms allows people to go about their lives without having to question their actions or the actions of others. But when social change produces situations outside the reach of established norms, individuals can no longer rely on shared understandings of how to act. Rather, they must negotiate new ways of acting, a process that is a potential source of conflict and opportunity.[17]

The deinstitutionalization of the traditional family has triggered a lot of reactions on the political scene and even in the media, some of which predicted "The Slow Death of 'Traditional' Families in America."[18] The American New Right in particular, according to Ben Barka, is calling for a return to the traditional family model.[19] Political parties and advertising agencies have used and maintained nostalgia over the "golden age of family," even though scholars, such as sociologist Stephanie Coontz in her book *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, have tried to debunk the fantasy around the myth of the 1950s-style traditional family:

> Despite ever mounting evidence that families of the past were not as idyllic and families of the present not as dysfunctional as they are often portrayed, many political leaders and opinion makers in the United States continue to filter our changing family experiences and trends through the distortion lens of historical mythologizing about past family life.[20]

Much earlier, literature also started to expose the cracks in the bedrock of North American family ideals. As Sinclair Lewis put it in his Nobel Lecture in 1930, novelists had to divorce from "the clear and cold and pure and very dead"[21] fiction of the early twentieth century. The first American

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[17] Andrew J. Cherlin, "The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66 (November 2004): 848.

[18] Derek Thompson, "The Slow Death of 'Traditional' Families in America," *The Atlantic* (November 27), 2013.

[19] Mokhtar Ben Barka, "La famille dans le discours de la Nouvelle droite américaine," *Revue Française d'Études Américaines*, No. 97 (Septembre 2003): 23–42.

[20] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 2000 [1992]), xi.

[21] Sinclair Lewis, "The American Fear of Literature" (December 12, 1930), https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1930/lewis/lecture.

laureate in literature urged his fellow writers to engage fully with the reality of their country and overcome the deep-seated fear of "any literature which is not a glorification of everything American."[22] Calling for powerful social criticism, Lewis hoped for the day when American novelists would no longer have to "assert that all American men are tall, handsome, rich, honest, and powerful at golf," nor American women "perfect wives and mothers."[23] His sharp criticism of the alluring and fast-exporting American way of life was a first blow that undermined the foundation of a society that hailed the nuclear family as an archetypal model. Lewis's pioneering survey of suburban life gave pride of place to a territory literature had not yet mapped out, peopled with family men, "homeowners, as the expression goes, who are plagued by the problem of 'homelessness.'"[24] For almost a century now, fiction has continued to thrive on the paradox that Lewis's masterpiece *Babbitt* (1922) exposed crudely: "In fact there was but one thing wrong with the Babbitt house: It was not a home."[25] In 2017, Garth Risk Hallberg published *A Field Guide to the North American Family*, a collection of twenty-two vignettes and sixty-three illustrations that make up a "taxonomic survey of several aspects of domestic life."[26] From "Angst" to "Boredom," "Mortgage" to "Fiscal Responsibility," and "Love" to "Divorce," the entry titles bear witness to the persistent pitfalls of suburban life as Hallberg charts the parallel journeys of two families toward disenchantment:

> They came to Long Island for the relative quiet, the soothing bugsong in summer, in winter the cold crash of waves. … They came for the community, the neighborhood, the schools. All it cost was a thirty-year mortgage, club dues and green fees, and train-fare to the city five days a week. There were good years in these houses and these yards. There were pickup basketball games in the driveways, with the kids … And if, after the switch of standard time, they got home well after dark; and if gradually the kids became strangers; and if when the lights were out they only fell asleep exhausted … well, was that so different from what their own parents had done, chasing their own dreams of America?[27]

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[22] Lewis, "The American Fear of Literature."

[23] Lewis, "The American Fear of Literature."

[24] Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora, the Suburb and the Twentieth-century American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

[25] Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (New York: Oxford University Press 2010 [1922]), 14.

[26] So reads the subtitle of Garth Risk Hallberg, *A Field Guide to the North American Family* (London: Vintage, 2017).

[27] Hallberg, *A Field Guide to the North American Family*, 52.

There are definitely traces of George F. Babbitt's anxiety, Harry "Rabbit"[28] Angstrom's distress, or Frank and April Wheeler's[29] longing in Gareth Risk Hallberg's updated state of the contemporary family.

From the 1950s onward, American suburbia became the favorite terrain of novelists who push and test the pillars of the American Dream. Urban planning largely contributed to the development of the suburban ideal, while family-friendly houses mushroomed all over the continent.[30] In those decades, family represented an increasingly lucrative market and became the main target for the advertising industry and media. Family was also concurrently depicted by writers as a major source of anxiety, a locus of entrapment, and a catalyst for breakdowns. Catherine Jurca claims that "[a]fter the 1950s, the suburban family is the family in trauma,"[31] that "there is no such thing as a happy family,"[32] and that "the term 'dysfunctional' is hardly adequate to address the scope of its continuous failure."[33] Family, and more globally the domestic sphere, operates as an incarcerating space from which it seems imperative to disengage. At the other end of the

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[28] See John Updike's tetralogy: *Rabbit, Run* (New York: Knopf, 1960); *Rabbit Redux* (New York: Knopf, 1971); *Rabbit Is Rich* (New York: Knopf, 1981); *Rabbit at Rest* (New York: Knopf, 1990).

[29] See Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1961).

[30] A result of a final wave of New Deal initiatives, postwar suburbanization led to a radical shift in terms of population distribution. In 1910, only seven percent of the American population lived in suburban areas, while the 2000 Census Special Reports indicate that: "From 1940 onward, suburbs accounted for more population growth than central cities and, by 1960, the proportion of the total U.S. population living in the suburbs (31 percent) was almost equal to the proportion of the population living in the central cities (32 percent)" (US Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, "Demographic Trends in the 20th Century," Census 2000 Special Reports (November 2002), https://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/censr-4.pdf). From 1947 to 1963, William Levitt and his company Levitt & Sons mass-manufactured one house every sixteen minutes, giving birth to a series of Levittowns from Long Island to Pennsylvania, exporting the family dreamhouse beyond continental America to Puerto Rico and even the French suburban city of Mennecy. As Colin Marshall reports, Levitt "even went so far as to declare his company 'the General Motors of the housing industry,' providing families the domestic component of the American dream" ("Levittown, the Prototypical American Suburb–A History of Cities in 50 Buildings, Day 25," *The Guardian* [April 15, 2015], https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/apr/28 /levittown-america-prototypical-suburb-history-cities).

[31] Jurca, *White Diaspora*, 166.

[32] Jurca, *White Diaspora,* 167.

[33] Jurca, *White Diaspora,* 167.

spectrum, the Beat writers offered their male heroes a last chance for escape. Their characters take flight, are forever on the run, working their way out of the breadwinner imagery, escaping the boring sales job, the insurance or real-estate career, and run away from the stay-at-home wife and children as well. Drawing on the legacy of the frontiersman and the alluring image of the vagabond, Jack Kerouac's hobo is quintessentially an anti-family man who turns down the injunctions of the happy family and embraces homelessness as an ethos.[34] While Kerouac roamed the American continent, poet Allen Ginsberg tore apart the nuclear family, scattering its members in the aisles of a Californian supermarket: "Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!"[35]

Family narratives of the mid-twentieth century often read as a reaction to "The Family"[36] as an American ideology, implying a set of norms and rules that proceed from a unique and hegemonic model, mostly the all-White middle-class family, largely transmitted in movies or on television. In her book devoted to the American 1950s, Tracy Floreani contends that "ethnic novels"[37] did inform "the construction of ethnicity and American identities,"[38] particularly those engaging with mass culture. However, she also makes it clear that "in visual mass culture, where the white, middle-class nuclear family became symbolic of American identity on the whole,

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[34] See Pierre-Antoine Pellerin, "La performance autobiographique et les masques du masculin dans la légende de Duluoz de Jack Kerouac (1947–1965)," PhD dissertation (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2013), 48. "À rebours de cette idéologie, les écrivains Beats se définissent autour de la figure du vagabond (hobo), un homme sans attache, sans femme ni enfant dont Kerouac fait un héros en voie de disparition dans 'The Vanishing American Hobo.' Le mode de vie frugal, le statut de célibataire indépendant, l'itinérance nomade et le libre arbitre insouciant de ce héros masculin sont idéalisés par les Beats qui calquent leur identité d'auteur sur ce modèle d'homme non domestiqué par les responsabilités conjugales et familiales."

[35] Allen Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California," *Howl, Kaddish, and Other Poems* (London: Penguin, 2009 [1956]), 14.

[36] Jon Bernardes, "'Family Ideology': Identification and Exploration," *The Sociological Review* 33, No. 2 (1985): 275-297.

[37] Tracy Floreani explains in her introduction: "I focus on five novels written by American ethnic minorities, immigrants, and the children of immigrants that engage the image-laden commercial culture surrounding them. Chin Yang Lee's *Flower Drum Song*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha*, William Saroyan's *Rock Wagram*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* constitute a critical engagement with and critique of ethnic invisibility, and they converse with various forms of visual mass culture narrative." *Fifties Ethnicities: The Ethnic Novel and Mass Culture at Midcentury* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013).

[38] Floreani, *Fifties Ethnicities*, 3.

the privileging and construction of a "dominant culture" is obvious–but not uncomplicated."[39] Family also becomes a chief American value because it goes along with solid postwar prosperity, technological progress, and unfailing optimism. Suburban areas are appealing because they allow anyone to take root in a new and vacuous space, a "surface," Roger Webster argues, "where the mundane and monotony prevail, consumerism and commodification determine lifestyles and time and space are reduced to the garden or television screen. Suburbia has no 'history'; its archives are empty."[40]

At the close of the twentieth century, the pressing desire to compose family narratives signaled a new direction in North American literature. The extraordinary number of autobiographies, memoirs, autofictions, and family narratives bears witness to this wish to dig out personal archives and draw up family trees. This trend not only puts the self but also the family to the fore, resuscitating more broadly questions about origins and filiation-interrogations that have been deeply ingrained in American fiction, as Joseph Riddel suggests:

> Having no history, the American writer has regularly found her- or himself in a kind of double-bind: needing first to invent that which could then be represented. This is particularly true of the nineteenth-century writer who was repeatedly engaged in genealogical fabrications, producing fables which at the same time constructed family history or "romance" problematic.[41]

Since North American literature of English expression emerged, the family, and the interrogations on origins and foundations that surfaced in its wake, seems to have been at the heart of the national fabric. Sylvie Laurent[42] highlights the Homeric potential of North America, a continent peopled

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[39] Floreani, *Fifties Ethnicities*, 3.
[40] Roger Webster (ed.), *Expanding Suburbia: Reviewing Suburban Narratives* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 2.
[41] Joseph N. Riddel, *Purloined Letters, Originality and Repetition in American Literature*, ed. Mark Bauerlein (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 72.
[42] See Sylvie Laurent, *Homérique Amérique* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), 11: "Si l'Amérique se raconte autant d'histoires, si elle produit autant de récits sur elle-même, c'est d'abord parce que, comme toutes les nations jeunes, elle est passionnée par le questionnement des origines et de ses fondements. Hommes nouveaux en quête de patrimoine historique, les Américains sont les habitants d'un pays trop neuf pour avoir sa légende des siècles. Sa naissance fut de surcroît marquée par l'arrachement au continent européen, détenteur de la mémoire ancestrale. Résolument déshéritée, l'Amérique est en rupture de ce monde et de ce temps."

mostly by new men and women in search of historical heritage, tormented
by a birth marked by the tearing away from the European continent. It is
only logical that after decades spent disbanding the family, writers turn
again to the family, draw on its fictional potential, compose their family
romance, and connect intimate stories to national history.

Family narratives endure and have considerably expanded in the last
thirty or more years. Literary critic André Clavel[43] argues that the early
1990s, and more specifically the Bush years, brought back to the fore the
notion of "family life" in the United States. To him, this decade was
characterized by an urge to retreat into the protective shade of family trees
and find shelter in the family unit or the shrink's office. The rise of
multigenerational frescos published in the 1990s evidences the renewed
interest in the family, portrayed as either an idealized unit, a mere fiction,
or an alienating space. The approaching new millennium revived
interrogations about American identity, and Crevecoeur's question "What's
an American?" seemed more topical than ever. The pressing desire to come
to terms with family history, and position family within a more global
American history, can be seen not only in the so-called ethnic or minority
American narratives of the twentieth century, Béatrice Pire[44] argues. Indeed,
an unexpected fringe of white, male, middle-class, successful writers
composed their family novel, giving additional proof that rearticulating
family history with collective history was imperative. Besides, the inaugural
catastrophe of 9/11 shook the very foundations of American society,

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[43] See André Clavel, "La Famille, fragile barricade," *Le Temps* (November 1, 2008):
"Et s'il fallait trouver un mot pour résumer la littérature des années Bush, ce serait
celui-ci: family life? C'est devenu une manie, une hantise. Papa, maman, mon psy,
et moi. Les grands-parents sont aussi du voyage, avec passage obligé par les cases
Alzheimer et maison de retraite. Pourquoi un tel repli à l'ombre protectrice des
arbres généalogiques?"

[44] See Béatrice Pire, "Les Nouveaux romans familiaux," *Critique*, No. 675–676
(Août–Septembre 2003): 585. "La plupart des récits américains du XXe siècle dits
ethniques ou minoritaires–noirs, juifs, et plus récemment asiatique, indiens ou
hispaniques–ont mis au jour une généalogie familiale, creusé la veine de
l'autobiographie pour exprimer ce sentiment d'étrangeté et relater l'expérience de la
différence ou de la déterritorialisation. Or, depuis peu, on constate une surprenante
renaissance chez de jeunes écrivains qu'on pouvait tenir pour intégrés ou peu
torturés par leurs origines. Blancs, de sexe masculin, issus de la classe moyenne, la
plupart des auteurs qui ont connu le succès, critique ou commercial, depuis l'an 2000
ont composé 'leur' roman familial." Béatrice Pire identifies four authors who,
according to her, rejuvenate the family narrative: Rick Moody, Jonathan Safran
Foer, Dave Eggers, and Jonathan Franzen.

exposed the precariousness of its collective ideals, and consequently prompted retreat within the family.

The prominent place family has occupied in recent fiction also proceeds from a renewal of literary forms and practices. At the turn of the twenty-first century, critics increasingly pointed out the shortcomings of the postmodernist experimentations of the previous decades, calling for a portrayal of characters that are fleshed out and show signs of humanity. In an article titled "Imagining the Postmodern Family," Sanford Pinsker fustigates postmodernist writers who, according to him, wrote under "the grip of ideas," and doing so "threaten[ed] to eradicate literary families altogether."[45] In his accusation, Pinsker claims:

> Postmodernist experimentation failed not only because its dazzling surfaces were hollow at the core, but also because its settings had no discernible address, its characters' bones no flesh, and its families no force. If literature is once again to become a humanistic enterprise, it needs to imagine fully human beings, and I would argue that that requires fully human families.[46]

Critic Joseph Dewey coined the expression "postmodernist with a heart,"[47] a phrase revealing that late-century writers are saturated with a combination of influences that range from "postmodern gimmicks" to "realistic narratology." This double heritage is characteristic of writers like David Foster Wallace or Dave Eggers, about whom British writer Zadie Smith said: "they know a great deal about the world. They understand macro-microeconomics, the way the internet works, maths, philosophy, but … they're still people who know something about the street, about family, love, sex, whatever."[48] Robert McLaughlin observed this trend among authors who wrote at the turn of the twenty-first century and strove to reconnect "language to the social sphere or, to put it another way, to reenergize literature's social mission, its ability to intervene in the social world, to have an impact on actual people and the actual social institutions in which they live their lives."[49] This effort to connect to the surrounding world and engage with it leads writers to take a closer look at their

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[45] Sanford Pinsker, "Imagining the Postmodern Family," *The Georgia Review* 48, No. 3 (1994): 508.

[46] Pinsker, "Imagining the Postmodern Family," 514.

[47] Joseph Dewey, "Rick Moody," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 23, No. 2 (2003): 20.

[48] Zadie Smith, quoted in James Wood, "Human, All Too Inhuman," *New Republic Online* (July 24, 2000), https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman.

[49] Robert L. McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World," *Symplokè* 12, No. 1–2 (2004): 53.

environment and put family under scrutiny. The wane of postmodernity and the challenging of its legacy have also been sources of concern for contemporary writers who have metaphorically identified themselves as a generation of orphans, searching for tutelary figures. David Foster Wallace confessed this harrowing urge for self-examination, filiation, and origins in an interview with Larry McCaffery in 1993:

> The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout our formative years. We're kind of wishing some parents would come back. And of course, we're uneasy about the fact that we wish they'd come back–I mean, what's wrong with us? Are we total pussies? Is there something about authority and limits we actually need? And then the uneasiest feeling of all, as we start gradually to realize that parents in fact aren't ever coming back-which means "we're" going to have to be the parents.[50]

Wallace's statement makes it clear that the family metaphor continues to run deep in the North American imaginary, proving once more that family, in its ever-shifting narratives and forms, has a boundless potential for fiction.

Indeed, the diversification of family structures eventually coincided with a craving for more representativity, not only in fiction but also in media, allowing the family sphere and the public sphere to coalesce. On North American screens, families are as popular as ever, on TV shows (*Modern Family*, *Brothers and Sisters*, *This Is Us*, *Workin' Moms*) or reality shows (*Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, *Hogan Knows Best*, *Teen Mom*, *Duck Dynasty*, *19 Kids and Counting*, *The Real Housewives*, *Mob Wives*, *Jon and Kate Plus 8*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, *Sister Wives*), providing the viewers with representations and depictions of families in all their forms and patterns. On the whole, family has survived the major sociodemographic transformations of the last decades. On social networks, family hashtags have been flourishing (more than 396 million #family on Instagram),[51] and in 2010, 98.2 percent of American respondents told the researchers of the World Value Survey that family was "important" or "very important" in their lives.

While the traditional nuclear family used to offer a very sharp image of what family was, the outlines are now blurry, and it is increasingly difficult

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[50] Larry McCaffery, "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, No. 2 (1993): 150.
[51] Date of data: 25 July 2021.

to define family. Yet, it still plays a pivotal role as the contributors to this book show through their different disciplinary approaches, examining the centrality of family as both an individual unit and a social, political, and legal construct. By questioning how family and families are portrayed, the authors seek to investigate the gap between what family really is, what it stands for, and how it is represented.

Because of its founding character, high stakes revolve around the social, legal, and political definition and role of family. Stephanie Coontz[52] reminds us that if politicians of the last decades–Ronald Reagan among them–instrumentalized families, President Theodore Roosevelt warned his nineteenth-century counterparts that the nation's future rested on "the right kind" of families. The first part of this book will examine more closely the social and political impact of the diversification of family patterns in the United States and Canada, and whether they need to be monitored as social units, redefined as legal entities, or challenged as political ideologies.

Based on the field study she conducted in Los Angeles–the city with the largest Armenian population outside of Yerevan–Anouche Der Sarkissian questions the crucial role families play in the migration process. By highlighting the variety of pathways and the complexities of identity options available to immigrants, she shows how heterogeneous the American-Armenian families are. She thus goes beyond the stereotypical representation of cohesive family units in the migratory context to reveal fragmented and more complex patterns of family behaviors due to local socioeconomic factors.

On the other side of the border, family structures have also multiplied with the social, economic, and demographic evolutions of Canadian society. Marie Moreau examines the changes in family dynamics, and how Canada has accepted and accompanied these evolutions, in the hope of determining how socially liberal this North American society is. By analyzing how the institutions, the judiciary, and the state have shaped and defined the new family forms, she contends that official recognition granted through this legal framework is proof of a great flexibility toward family behaviors. A further scrutiny of the public opinion's representations of family allows her to question whether Canadians favor individual choices over moral norms when it comes to evolving family structures.

As for the American Christian Right, however, family is not a construct which evolves over time, but rather a passive institution which suffers the repercussions of outer social and economic changes, Mokhtar Ben Barka

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[52] Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 93–4.

argues. The belief that social order rests on the dominance of the traditional family model leads the Christian Right to portray the contemporary evolutions of family structures as posing a threat to the stability of the whole nation. By assessing the ideological foundations of the Christian Right's argument in favor of the traditional family, Ben Barka demonstrates that focusing their discourse on family clearly stems from political as well as ideological considerations. In addition, a close examination of the vocal and intense family-oriented activism of the different groups that identify as part of the Christian Right–from their successful stop-ERA movement in the 1970s to the 2019 laws restricting abortion in Georgia and Alabama–enables Ben Barka to assess their impact on families, politics, and American society at large.

In 2015, the #OscarsSoWhite controversy helped raise awareness of the lack of diversity on screen, highlighting the social impact of representation– or lack thereof–of different groups in the media. How families are portrayed in the media is of paramount importance. According to Coontz, "[o]ur most powerful visions of traditional families derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of 1950s television sit-coms."[53] Current successful modern TV shows uniquely revolving around traditional gendered nuclear Cleaver-style families[54] are very scarce, which shows how the way families are represented on screen reflects the evolution of family forms and the new realities of North American families. This in turn helps influence the norms. The second part of this book will therefore analyze how the media represents and stages families for their North American audience.

In her chapter, Eva Maria Schörgenhuber examines media representation of celebrities' infants and what they more generally reveal about American families. She demonstrates that the staging of celebrities' children is instrumental and creates illusive intimate and affective ties with the audience. As the borders between celebrities and the public dissolve, these children become national symbols–or, as Eva Maria Schörgenhuber puts it, "children of the nation." Besides, by showing that adopted children, or children born via surrogacy, are treated differently by the media, she raises the question of the persistent hegemonic representation of normative families.

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[53] Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 23.
[54] The show *Leave It to Beaver*, which aired in the late 1950s, depicts the idyllic suburban family life of the Cleavers, the epitome of the conservative nuclear family organized around traditional gendered roles.

Eglantine Zatout's contribution further examines media representations of the family. In her study, she uses four television shows created, written, produced, and run by Shonda Rhimes (ABC's *Grey's Anatomy*, *Private Practice*, *Scandal*, and *How to Get Away With Murder*) to investigate the taboo around interracial heterosexual and same-sex couples. She delves into the way those couples have moved from complete invisibility to a multitude of representations, though they remain peripheral. However, she seeks to demonstrate that while interracial heterosexual couples remain marginalized, same-sex couples are heteronormalized on television, and particularly in Shonda Rhimes's shows.

Couples and families are central themes in TV drama, even in situations when the nuclear family–the symbol of the American dream–is thrown into an absolute nightmare. This is what Yvonne-Marie Rogez observes by exploring the AMC TV series *Fear the Walking Dead*. Rogez notes that, despite its postapocalyptic context, the program does not offer a new reflection on the definition of families and rather rests on classic visions of family units, unlike its companion series *The Walking Dead* which stages more subversive and imaginative family schemes. In this postapocalyptic landscape, the nuclear family thus appears as the unit that should be preserved. Surprisingly, zombies do not occupy the central scene, and instead it is the family. As with most North American TV shows, the plot revolves around family dynamics and drama, illustrating, Rogez argues, that postapocalyptic landscapes reveal North American viewers' obsession with family relationships.

The third part of this book delves into the fictional potential of the family as writers expose its precariousness. At the turn of the century, American writer Rick Moody declared: "Well, family turns out to be–at least in America–the structure on which to project political interests and concerns. In other words, the best way to talk about America as a whole is to talk about the American family."[55] Moody's remark draws explicit links between literature and politics, showing that family, and the multiplicity of narratives it generates, deeply relates to the national body. When the national fabric tears apart, the disintegration of the family unit looms large. However, fiction offers strategies of survival, narratives that connect individuals to surrogate families, and tales of fantasized lineage and ancestry.

In his chapter, Bastien Meresse examines Thomas Pynchon's novel *Bleeding Edge* (2013), which unfolds with the 9/11 attacks as a backdrop.

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[55] Rick Moody with Fran Dilustro Gordon, "Moody on Dark Humor, Bright Angels, and Quantum Leaps," *Poets & Writers* 27, No. 2 (1999): 37.

Meresse observes that Pynchon deviates from his tradition of writing epics and, in an unprecedented example, composes a narrative whose scope is restricted to the family unit. Though the narrative of the attacks is limited to a couple of pages, the book does convey the idea that, in the political fallout of 9/11, family remains the last possible heterotopia, Meresse argues. If the home becomes a space of retreat, it does not transform into a safe haven. Indeed, the early 2000s coincided with the rise of technologies invading the private space of the home, and more specifically the private space of the children's bedroom. Establishing a comparison between *Bleeding Edge* and a short story Pynchon published back in 1964, "The Secret Integration," Meresse shows the writer's continuing concern with the indoctrination of children under parental pressure. Initiation or integration to the adult world seems to follow the ritual pattern of walking the line, be it crossing the border from innocence to corruption or walking the color line. To counter what Meresse calls the indoctrination of toxic fathers, children must turn away from the parricidal temptation and strive to slip away.

Saloua Karoui-Elounelli observes a paradox in American metafictional narratives, as some experimental writers, like John Hawkes and John Gardner, unexpectedly choose family as a recurring pattern, although family narratives are attached to a tradition of realistic writing that they wish to overturn. As the title of this chapter suggests, the family chronicles of John Hawkes and John Gardner are perverted because both writers deliberately engage in a revision and subversion of all forms associated with domestic realism. Opting for generic plurality, they offer a complete revisiting of representational conventions, and as such transform the very act of storytelling into a form of survival.

In the final chapter, Sophie Chapuis exposes the potential violence that emanates from the family unit, especially when it feeds on a violence that is deeply rooted in North American history. When David Vann published *Goat Mountain* in 2013, his ambition was to investigate the mind of a murderer, the killer he could have become himself, having been raised among weapons. When the eleven-year-old protagonist, on a hunting trip with his father and grandfather, shoots a poacher instead of a buck, the unapologetic narrator connects his fatal gesture with the tacit "law of the family"–a family of mythical fathers he looks up to, longing for recognition. Among them, Cain, the Biblical murderer, imposes himself as the prototypical American ancestor, ousting the figure of his father Adam who long stood for the archetype of the American man. Chapuis contends that David Vann takes the family to pieces the better to expose the damage caused by a dominant discourse on individualism that undermines the

family unit, forbids any sense of belonging, and insinuates in its core a logic of exclusion.

To conclude, this book strives to capture a vivid portrait of contemporary families, as all contributions suggest that family–as a solid unit, a fantasy, or a narrative pattern–still endures, and is submitted to constant revisiting. Indeed, in spite of the waning of its traditional model, family, in its ample array of meanings and understandings, continues to thrive and permeate North American society and fiction.

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Part One:

Outlining Family Patterns:
Social and Political Realities
of North American Families

CHAPTER ONE

LE PORTRAIT FRAGMENTÉ DES FAMILLES IMMIGRÉES AUX ÉTATS-UNIS. L'EXEMPLE DES ARMÉNIENS-AMÉRICAINS DE CALIFORNIE

ANOUCHE DER SARKISSIAN

Introduction

Dans le peu d'études consacrées aux immigrés arméniens des États-Unis et à leurs descendants, la famille apparaît comme une institution fondamentale de l'organisation sociale communautaire.[1] Elle est décrite comme un lieu où l'histoire collective est transmise et où les traditions ancestrales sont préservées. Elle est un « idéal » qui « continue d'exercer son autorité » sur les générations subséquentes, imprégnées d'un sens aigu des obligations familiales.[2] Elle est un espace clos délimitant les frontières entre les membres du « clan » et les *odar* (étrangers), terme employé pour décrire tous ceux qui ne font pas partie de la « grande famille » arménienne. Elle s'impose enfin comme un agent de (re)construction identitaire et de

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[1] Harold Nelson, « The Armenian Family: Changing Patterns of Family Life in a California Community », thèse de doctorat, University of California, 1954; Ingrid O'Grady, « Ararat, Etchmiadzin, and Haig (Nation, Church, and Kin): A Study of the Symbol System of American Armenians », thèse de doctorat, Université Catholique d'Amérique, 1979; Robert Mirak, *Torn Between Two Lands: Armenians in America, 1890 to World War I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); David Waldstreicher, *The Armenian Americans* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989); Anny Bakalian, *Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian* (New York: Routledge, 2011 [1993]).

[2] Joan Bamberger, « Family and Kinship in an Armenian-American Community », *Journal of Armenian Studies* 1, No. 2-3 (1986): 79.

résistance contre la disparition de la culture d'origine que menacent la dispersion du groupe et son assimilation.[3]

Les résultats préliminaires d'une récente enquête de terrain menée dans des espaces arméniens de Californie[4] entrent en résonance avec cette littérature. Toutefois, il ressort surtout de cette étude empirique une extrême diversité dans les comportements et les représentations. La famille, comme lieu, valeur et pratique, joue un rôle de dénominateur commun qui entretient l'idée d'un « nous » cohésif du collectif communautaire. Cependant, elle cristallise aussi de fortes disparités intrafamiliales, ainsi que des clivages intracommunautaires, qui érodent l'image lisse de la famille.

Dans ce chapitre, nous proposons de contextualiser les discours politiques, médiatiques et scientifiques sur les familles immigrées aux États-Unis, avant d'ébaucher un portrait sur le vif des familles arméno-américaines, en se fondant sur l'exemple des Arméniens de Californie.

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[3] Cette angoisse permanente de l'extinction de la nation arménienne hors du *yerguir* (pays) s'incarne dans les métaphores *djermag tchart* (massacre blanc) ou *white genocide*. Ces expressions, dont l'origine est incertaine, sont récurrentes dans l'imagerie de la langue arménienne pour décrire des phénomènes aussi variés que les conversions forcées, la destruction du patrimoine culturel et architectural arménien en Turquie, l'intégration dans les sociétés d'accueil. Le blanc peut se lire en opposition à la symbolique sanguinaire du rouge, présente dans les références aux épisodes les plus sombres de l'histoire nationale, tels les massacres de 1894-1896 ordonnés par Abdülhamid II, dit le « sultan rouge », ou le génocide de 1915 dont le commencement est marqué par la rafle des intellectuels arméniens du 24 avril 1915, appelée aussi « dimanche rouge. »

[4] L'enquête s'est déroulée en 2017 et 2018 sur une durée totale de sept mois. Elle a comporté la fréquentation journalière d'espaces arméniens (églises, commerces, médias, lieux culturels, écoles, cours de langue, cimetières, monuments, programmes d'assistance aux immigrés et réfugiés, groupes Facebook, etc.) dans le Grand Los Angeles, deuxième agglomération arménienne du monde après Erevan, la capitale d'Arménie. Des séjours et des rencontres à Fresno, dans la San Joaquin Valley, foyer historique de l'immigration arménienne en Californie, San Francisco et San Diego ont permis d'élargir le cadre d'analyse. En plus de cette « participation observante », 84 entretiens (d'une durée comprise entre 1h30 et 5h) ont été menés, en arménien et en anglais, auprès de résidents californiens nés à l'étranger et aux États-Unis, s'auto-identifiant comme Arméniens. Pour la population immigrée, l'échantillon a ciblé des répondants d'origines variées (Allemagne, Arménie, Azerbaïdjan, Égypte, France, Inde, Irak, Iran, Israël/Palestine, Liban, Russie, Suède, Syrie, Turquie) installés à des époques différentes (des années 1940 à nos jours). Ce choix a permis de dégager des expériences communes tout en soulignant la singularité et la multiplicité des trajectoires.

Famille et familialisme[5] dans les discours migratoires

Dans le cadre d'une radiographie de la famille contemporaine nord-américaine, un examen des familles immigrées[6] s'impose. Les immigrés et leurs enfants constituent actuellement plus d'un quart de la population américaine (26%); ils en représenteront plus d'un tiers en 2065 (36%), soit le double par rapport à 1965.[7] Au-delà de cette prégnance numérique, la famille fait désormais partie du répertoire des discours populaires, politiques et médiatiques sur l'immigration. Dans les argumentaires nativistes et restrictionnistes, l'immigré est appréhendé comme un « problème » démographique et économique, car il est perçu comme une famille en puissance. La « chaîne migratoire » ou « migration en chaîne », expression jusque-là neutre, utilisée depuis les années 1960 par les scientifiques pour décrire les processus multiformes par lesquels l'installation d'un immigré entraîne des « courants migratoires »,[8] est devenue un leitmotiv des groupes anti-immigration. Dans cette rhétorique, le lien familial est perçu comme étant la cause de vagues humaines subies d'indésirables, par opposition à une politique migratoire « sélective », fondée sur les « mérites » et les compétences des candidats à l'immigration[9].

Au contraire de cette idéologie, les organisations de défense des immigrés et des sans-papiers érigent aujourd'hui le droit à la famille comme un argument de poids pour demander la régularisation de résidents illégaux ou pour contester des décisions d'expulsions.[10] La « réunification familiale » est au cœur des revendications qui appellent à une modification

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[5] Le familialisme décrit des comportements, des croyances ou des idéologies qui accordent à la famille une place de premier plan dans l'organisation sociale.

[6] Bien qu'il n'en existe pas de définition stricte, les sociologues appellent communément « familles immigrées » les foyers composés d'au moins un parent immigré. Voir Nancy Foner, dir., *Across Generations: Immigrant Families in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

[7] "Immigration's Impact on Past and Future U.S. Population Change," Hispanic Trends Project, Pew Research Center, 28 septembre 2015,
https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2015/09/28/chapter-2-immigrations-impact-on-past-and-future-u-s-population-change/

[8] John S. MacDonald et Leatrice D. MacDonald, « Chain Migration Ethnic Neighborhood Formation and Social Networks », *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 42, No. 1 (janvier 1964): 82-97.

[9] Voir, par exemple, les sites Internet des groupes restrictionnistes *Federation for American Immigration Reform* (FAIR), *Center for Immigration Studies* (CIS) ou *NumbersUSA* qui dénoncent les dangers de la « chaîne familiale ».

[10] Amalia Pallares, *Family Activism: Immigrant Struggles and the Politics of Noncitizenship* (New Brunswick: N.J, Rutgers University Press, 2014).