American Infants: Coping with Trauma and Becoming Historical in A Home at the End of the World and American Pastoral.

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Culture, Trauma, and Conflict
Cultural Studies Perspectives on War

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CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING
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AMERICAN INFANTS: COPING WITH TRAUMA AND BECOMING HISTORICAL IN A HOME AT THE END OF THE WORLD AND AMERICAN PASTORAL

VINCENT STEPHENS

Introduction

Childhood is a national focal point for properly socializing future citizens. Vernacular notions of children as “the future” and the nation’s most “precious resources” inform the ways schools, churches, and families initiate children into citizenship and nationhood. In the contemporary U.S.A., there is a palpable national investment in securing the potential “resources” children offer and the implied “future” they represent, through modes that often reproduce conservative logics of assimilation. Replicating social attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate social uniformity in its young obscures the potential for more complete and progressive modes of citizenship formation. Depictions of children in fictional literature are a fruitful source for exploring examples of youth citizen initiation. These representations can stimulate imagination and illustrate possibilities that point to a genuinely new national future rather than a static reproduction of the status quo. My essay explores key characters in Michael Cunningham’s A Home at the End of the World and Philip Roth’s American Pastoral to illustrate how adult negotiations of traumatized citizenship are integral to the how children incorporate social difference and disruption into their sense of national identity. The essay is chiefly concerned with ways of reconsidering social principles rather than direct policy reform.

U.S. public institutions tend to emphasize homogeneity and assimilation as national ideals. Implicit in these ideals, rooted in post-WWII, is the notion that cultural homogeneity/assimilation is the most desirable path to achieving social access and equality. In terms of American children’s education, Valerie Lehr has noted how integral the traditional heterosexual nuclear family structure and “proper” gender roles are to psychological and moral development literature. Indeed such literature tends to emphasize these as keys to an “orderly society.”
She has appropriately noted how such theories and the related social attitudes fail to consider how children/youth can be helped to recognize and face conflicts they will experience as they try to develop a sense of identity (Lehr 1999, 149). Building from Lehr I would argue even further that such restrictive narratives maintain an artificial and traumatizing “order” that fails to adequately prepare children for engaging with the very inequities, tensions and dissatisfaction that have haunted adult citizens negotiating postwar American life.

In the “War on Terror” era the Bush administration has introduced a host of initiatives intended to regulate information, communication and bodies. Whereas such efforts focus on “external threats” there is an internal war conservatives have waged in an effort to codify normality in the intimate realms of family, childcare, and kinship. President Bush’s proposed Federal Marriage Amendment, the series of anti-gay/lesbian initiatives passed in eleven states during the 2004 presidential election, and related measures intended to restrict queer citizens’ access to civil protections are explicit attempts to restrict the permissible intimacies within the modern “American Way of Life.” (Wildman 2004, 26-27) Such measures are the historical byproduct of explicitly anti-gay and lesbian conservative organizing rooted in the late ’70s political emergence of evangelical fundamentalist movements loosely defined as the Christian Right (Herman 1997). The contemporary investment in American nationalism makes uniform notions of authentic “American” kinship profoundly relevant to social politics. The postwar nationalistic focus on assimilation is a broad paradigm that has fostered organized attempts to narrow the constitution of legally protected and culturally affirmed social identities.

In the immediate postwar era the assimilation ideal enabled Americans to distinguish themselves from other nations by defining an “American Way of Life” as one characterized by a firm belief in democracy, the embrace of free enterprise and a commonsense reliance on Judeo-Christian theologies as the basis for cultural morality. (Foner 1998, 236-47) Racially and religiously stigmatized groups—particularly African-Americans, Catholics, Jews and white ethnics—were among those groups who approached the period with the greatest optimism. (Chafe 1982, 69-71; Hertzberg 1997, 290) However, the promises of access and equality were stalled for many socially excluded groups until the mid-to-late 50s social movements that culminated into the Civil Rights and New Left movements. America asserted its political and militaristic world supremacy in WWII and the Vietnam War with differing degrees of success. These wars can also be understood as crucial benchmarks for assessing the underlying cultural logics of the postwar “American Way of Life.” Anxieties about the stability of a distinctly American life, amidst an era of mass immigration, and the ability of U.S. democracy, and national values, to righteously assert themselves globally are central to the U.S.’ delayed intervention into WWII and aggressive Vietnam interference.

The democracy-centered discourse that emerged from America’s defeat of Nazism centered on a contrast between democratic freedom and diversity, and communist oppression. The paradox of America’s victory is that despite substantial evidence of the European genocide, the U.S. intervened after millions were killed and extensive political maneuvering. President Roosevelt struggled to balance his personal awareness of the Holocaust with political perceptions of him as biased toward Jewish interests and public anti-immigrant sentiments rooted in fears of an immigrant “flood.” (Diner 2004, 212-13; Hertzberg 1997, 280). Immigration quotas quietly increased from 1938-41, which Hertzberg defines as Roosevelt’s “act of conscience,” but it was an act devoid of “political trouble”; in December 1942 Roosevelt declared that the Nazis would be punished as war criminals but also, “reassured Congress . . . that he had no plans for proposing the lifting of immigration restrictions” (Hertzberg 1997, 284). The administration also initially declined to use money or supplies to bribe the Nazis which changed in 1944 when Roosevelt established the War Refugee Board. (Hertzberg 1997, 286-87) An extensive cultural investment in a national purity and way of life, untainted by foreign cultures, informed the United States’ initially neutral WWII stance. Postwar the United States employed its eradication of the Holocaust and freeing of imprisoned European Jews as a symbol of American morality anchored in the nation’s unique diversity. The penalty of this renewed nationalism was explicit pressure on “ethnic” Americans to succumb to majority culture and minimize difference. American Jews were among the groups restricted by the new nationalism and they largely dissembled, for they had little room to question America and resist assimilation since they, “. . . needed to feel that they were part of America, that they were among the victors. Possible American complicity by inaction in the murder of the Jews of Europe could not be discussed. If such an accusation were true, America’s Jews would have had to continue to think of themselves as deeply alien.” (Hertzberg 1997, 291) Though the postwar period fostered a new era of social access for American Jews hope for national accountability and a genuine national investment in diversity linger.

Lingering postwar fears of a missed opportunity to thwart communism were also central to the U.S. intervention into Vietnam. According to Randall Bennett Woods, “With the onslaught of Cold war, realpolitik was preoccupied with markets and bases joined with liberal idealists who wanted to spread the blessings of freedom, democracy, and a mixed economy to the rest of the world. In turn, they joined together to call for an all-out effort to defeat the forces of international communism.” (Woods 2005, 222) Vietnam is especially significant to the study of postwar American culture because it catalyzed questions about
the way of life implied by the militaristic assertion of democracy. The New Left movement protested the war but also posed a larger critique of the restrictive ideas about racial hierarchy, gender propriety and family structures central to the national culture. As Woods notes, “... the antiwar movement included left-wing students and intellectuals, many of whom had been active in the civil rights movement and who saw the war as an expression of an essentially corrupt political and economic system.” (Woods 2005, 236) By assessing the essential paradox of a culture premised on equality and freedom yet characterized by patterns of social and economic equality the movement ultimately questioned if the “American Way of Life,” fostered by democracy and capitalism, was a lifestyle worth spreading. The emergence of youth-oriented communitarianism and the broad countercultural “rejection of traditional sexual mores and family structures” during the era were not entirely successful or enduring. (Woods 2005, 261-62) However their emergence, alongside the increasingly prominent second-wave feminist, and gay and lesbian liberation movements embodied the search for new American ways of living in the intimate realms of sexuality, gender, and family. The tensions between American postwar ideas of freedom and institutional oppression constitute the core of postwar traumatized citizenship, particularly for racial and sexual outsiders excluded from an imagined cultural mainstream.

Stymied optimism

The subtext of the postwar assimilation narrative was the continuation of structural inequities such as lower pay scales for women (Evans 2001, 191-94), racial segregation and the proliferation of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) identity as the core American power elite. (Brookhiser 1991; Christopher 1989; Robertiello and Huguet 1987; Kaufmann 2004) African-Americans did not gain access to legal and social inclusion until the Civil Rights era and feminist groups reached their acme in the late 60s/early 70s. In contrast the racialization of “white ethnics” fostered greater social access to American life for Catholics and Jewish Americans who, in the face of Hitler’s attempted “Final Solution” had perhaps the greatest incentive to embrace the “American Way of Life.” (Martin 1978, 3; Diner 2004, 6; Sarna 2004, 274; Moore 2004, xi; Shapiro 1992, xv) Despite overt racial and gender discrimination the looming possibility of racial conformity was an alluring conceit for groups who could integrate themselves into a white-dominated culture. However, the implied “authenticity” of WASP identity, and related social privileges/advantages complicated the potential for Jewish Americans to fully inhabit their newfound access to white privilege in America. (Foner 1998, 239) The negotiation of white privilege with religious and ethnic “difference” of Judaism has remained a trope of post-WWII Jewish American arts and letters. (Hertzberg 1997, 291-93)

Within the postwar era legalized discrimination and inequality based on racial/ethnic and gender differences co-existed with the new era of freedom. The white and patriarchal biases of the new citizenship ideal were grounded in heteronormative relations supported by multiple logics that stigmatized sexual diversity and gender transgression. The cultural reliance on fixed gender roles, Judeo-Christian fundamentalism, and irrational fears of “inverts” susceptible to Communist blackmail and thus national security threats were among the justifications for socially excluding and legally persecuting “sexual deviants.” (Johnson 2004, 9) Gender propriety also fostered social suspicion toward professional and/or unmarried women as non-normative. (Evans 2001, 192)

The social identity movements that arose in the 1950s onward were grounded in social responses to micro and macro levels of stigma, exclusion, and inequality that traumatized, and mobilized, generations of social outsiders. The social sphere is a particularly salient mode of transformation and identity formation within the dialectical relationship of the social with the legal, economic and political spheres. The major postwar social movements, the Black Freedom Movement and the New Left it inspired, were largely organized around a uniquely American postwar traumatic moment (Foner 1998, 288). Notably these subcultures awakened to the postwar nation’s failure to embrace and incorporate the democratic ideals it proclaimed as the cores of U.S. citizenship. The defeat of widespread fascism and assertion of U.S. military power bolstered America’s world profile but failed to reform internal constraints until citizen-led movements revealed and attempted to reverse the traumas of failed citizenship. The ongoing relevance of these landmark movements is undervalued in contemporary America because they disrupted postwar narratives of nationalistic unity—values American public institutions continue to idealize and advocate.

The epistemology of traumatic citizenship

There is a vast epistemological value of discussing modern American history in terms of how citizens have responded to citizenship trauma by resisting and transforming such historical traumas into ethical democratic social practices. Engaging with responses to trauma is particularly germane at a time when American institutions continue to perpetuate narratives of homogeneity that de-emphasize the nation’s ongoing struggles with social difference in favor of broad unifying narratives emphasizing Americaness in an anti-terrorism, pro-empire global context. Economic and political marginalization are quantifiable dimensions of American experience; however the profound role of social
exclusion as a suppressive “structure of feeling” is less palpable. If history is not merely comprised of Great Events we must begin to account for how history is translated in the most intimate of social spaces—homes, schools, places of worship, etc. These intimate spaces make the concept of the world and the possibilities of citizenship accessible from our earliest stages of learning. A fear of social transformation—the way people understand themselves and relate as a society and as citizens is central to the political suspicion and social disapproval movements experienced at their most disruptive moments. Though racial and ethnic social movement still struggle for social recognition certain leaders and movements have attained iconicity.

It is arguable that second and third wave feminism, and sexual liberation movements have rarely entered into mainstream discourse as “positive” movements “suitable” for translating to children. One suspects that the questions various factions within these movements have raised about sexual diversity, gender roles, sexual orientation, and family structures could complicate and challenge the discourses of intimate spaces. National trends such as the gendered division of labor and valorization of the nuclear family would require serious reconsideration. Articulating the vulnerabilities of women and sexual minorities to explicit forms of violation and discrimination are challenging and vital because these are not in the past tense but central to American life in covert forms. Addressing the ways that racism, sexism, gender- and homophobia inform the social experiences of Americans is a challenging conversation to have with children in intimate settings. Such conversations require adults to interrogate national history in ways that might disrupt their own sense of citizenship. These disruptive practices are essential knowledge for children. Shielding children—future citizens—from the richness and relevance of trauma-fueled movements undermines the way these movements fully enacted democratic principles and fails to prepare children for engaging with and valuing “difference.” Historical distortions also stifle children’s potential to use social experience in transformative ways—the key component to imagining other forms of living and relating beyond narrowly racialized and heteronormative forms. “Ethnic” children, female children, gender disruptive children and those raised in non-traditional households need knowledge of the movements which affirmed the right of cultural outsiders to civic access and social inclusion to develop a sense of personal identity and national belonging. The novels my chapter examines illuminate ways to engage with the vitality of social trauma as an episteme.

Two tales of sexual and familial ethics

Contemporary American literature is one of the vital spaces for reflecting on the psychological and cultural toll of sublimating traumas of difference for acceptance, and the possibilities modeled by characters who use trauma and difference to transform social relations. As a cultural genre novels are a potent archive of the diverse ways humans conceptualize cultural negotiations of everyday lives framed by political and militaristic unrest. The most lucid and influential depictions of the quotidian can stimulate complex intellectual and political engagement with a range of social possibilities. My chapter contrasts the depictions of children of the American future in American Pastoral and Michael Cunningham’s A Home at the End of the World. The potential of children to perpetuate U.S. citizenship ideals is one of the core themes of both novels. Pastoral illustrates how a postwar couple’s disengagement from the complexity of American ethnic and religious conflict distorts their daughter’s ability to develop a critical perspective. Essentially forced to choose between absolute conformity and free form radicalism she resorts to a dangerous and near paradoxically depicted kind of protest. Home’s narrative traces the experiences of adults traumatized by death, sexual difference and familial dysfunction. The characters’ transgressions of heteronormative sex and gender roles reshape their sense of identity and fuels the creation of unconventional family forms that incorporate sex, friendship, romance, and parenting in innovative ways. Comparing the two novels illuminates both the appeal of assimilation to the historically traumatized and its limitations, and the unique potential of transforming trauma. Comparison also illustrates how progressive citizenship lies in active responses to historical conditions and changes in behavior rather than the embrace of received narratives that anchor national memory.

In Pastoral Roth’s perennial alter ego/brain Nathan Zuckerman runs into a neighborhood hero from his childhood, Seymour “Swede” Levov, at a baseball game in New York in 1985. Levov asks Zuckerman to help him write a tribute for his father Lou’s funeral. During Zuckerman’s initial encounter with Seymour, his blank, inoffensive demeanor amazes him. Zuckerman recalls how the Swede was a Nordic-looking heroic, high school jock, who embodied the image of the 40s “All-American” and as a Jew suggested the possibility of Jewish assimilation in postwar America. Levov enlisted in the army at the tail end of the war and upon his return declined a baseball career to work at the family’s glove-making business. Levov also married Dawn, an Irish Catholic former Miss New Jersey 1945 who competed in the Miss America Pageant. Seymour and Dawn moved to a suburban enclave, River Rock, New Jersey and had a daughter Merry. At a 1995 class reunion Zuckerman learns, from
relationship. Jonathan grows frustrated with their arrangement and abruptly moves to Arizona, which creates tension between Bobby and Clare. When Ned dies Bobby and Clare fly to Arizona, where Clare reveals she is pregnant. The trio returns to the east and purchases a home in Woodstock, using Clare’s trust fund. There they raise Bobby and Clare’s biological daughter Rebecca and run a café. Clare ultimately seeks a more traditional arrangement. When the HIV-positive Erich moves in, she eventually leaves with Rebecca to live with her mother. At the novel’s end Alice finds contentment in Arizona, and Jonathan and Bobby devote themselves to running the restaurant and nurse Erich who passes.

Negotiating alien/nation status

My analysis of the novels primarily focuses on Seymour and Merry, and Bobby and Rebecca to illuminate the limits and possibilities of citizenship within families. The desire to avoid the “white ethnic” alienation which could stem from questioning the U.S. WWII intervention, and the consequential affirmation of postwar opportunities for acceptance taints the Levovs’ political engagement. In Pastoral a third-generation Jewish man, Seymour, and his Irish-Catholic wife Dawn envision the ideal American life as one where religious and ethnic specificity disappear under the imaginary of “American.” In their conception of the nation they never envision that raising a daughter would require them to engage with Americanness as an ongoing construction that raises new questions, challenges and possibilities for each generation. The Levovs perfunctorily oppose Vietnam but adamantly oppose Merry’s anti-Vietnam activism because it disrupts their contented, assimilationist way of life. When Merry bombs a post-office to protest Vietnam their postwar optimism quickly tempers. The bombing ignites an array of missed opportunities for the Levovs to trump assimilation with a more nuanced sense of how ethnic Americans can define rather than occupy American identity. There are wildly varying critical opinions on Roth’s ideological perspective in Pastoral. Perhaps one of the novel’s greatest virtues lies less in its political peculiarities than the questions it raises about whether assimilation is desirable and what are the ethical responsibilities of citizens who purport to integrate themselves and their loved ones into the historical morass of postwar America. The lingering collision of WWII ghosts with Vietnam inspires a deep dissemblance away from national critique. To overtly critique Vietnam and champion critical inquiry is to assess the motives of militaristic intervention and the national ways of life it fosters. Feigning contentment enables the family to disengage from the cultural questions linking the wars as deeply political rather than altruistic wars.
In contrast to postwar optimism, the fluid relationships of \textit{Home} grow out of the experiences of characters who mature during the late 60s counterculture era. In \textit{Home}, Bobby’s biological family life was a traumatic space decimated over the course of his young life—Carlton accidentally walked through a glass sliding door when Bobby was a child; his mother passed during his teen years, and his father accidentally burned himself to death via cigarette, when Bobby was a young adult. (Cunningham 1999, 65, 76, 104) At each instance Bobby was traumatized and lapsed into a near fugue state.\footnote{Whereas Seymour’s gradual family dissolution paralyzed him.} Bobby’s pain transformed him. For Bobby life transcended the corporal and material thus for him death and loss were not permanent endings but natural extensions of life where people were constituted by memory and impact rather than physical presence.\footnote{Bobby’s coping with death and his disjunction with traditional sex and gender expectations enabled him to transform trauma into an alternative sense of kinship. He embodied a notion Ann Cvetkovich has theorized, notably, “how trauma can be a foundation for creating countercultural spheres rather than evacuating them.” (Cvetkovich 2003, 15)} The countercultural Bobby represented on the micro-level of his friends embodied hippie idealism but did not overtly adhere to a political model, a freedom that allowed him to avoid the indulgences and excesses of some hippie culture while fulfilling its freedom-oriented ideals. Bobby modeled a central aspect of Cvetkovich’s inquiry into, “how affective experience that falls outside of institutionalized or stable forms of identity or politics can form the basis of public culture.” (Cvetkovich 2003, 17) David J. Jarraway eloquently addressed the countercultural “poetry” of \textit{Home}’s characters when he noted how, “The monolithic notions of familial loyalty, marital monogamy, and passionate privacy—the immovable mountains if not the unshakable bedrock of mainstream, heterosexual culture—these notions would all appear to dissolve in the sheer “poetry” of Jonathan and Bobby and Clare’s extraordinarily unconventional lives.” (Jarraway 1996, 380)

Cunningham has noted how the novel was written during the first ten years of the AIDS epidemic and grew out of his experience as a teenage observer of 60s counterculture and a witness to AIDS. (Canning 2003, 92) Transcendence and alternate visions of living were inherent to the novel’s design. According to Cunningham:

Anybody who lived through and came out the other end of the period had a certain sense that the world was going to profoundly change. I was foolish enough to imagine that we were going to win, that women and gay people and people of color were going to triumph. And in some disorganized way, that we would actually defeat death itself. When you’re a seventeen-year-old on acid in 1968 that doesn’t seem wholly out of the question. And obviously that didn’t happen and things have changed in ways we never imagined. (Cunningham in Gambone 1999, 147)

The lingering hope for transcendence from systematic oppression seems to have inspired the possibilities Bobby represented. After Bobby eventually joins Clare and Jonathan an array of “chosen family” forms sustains them. (Weston 1991) Bobby and Jonathan maintain their ambiguous brother/companion relationship and Bobby serves as a lover and child to Clare. Jonathan variously functions as a platonic husband for Clare and an “uncle” for Bobby. When the trio moves to Woodstock co-parenting and mixing gender roles is integral to raising Rebecca. The family’s incorporation of Alice as a virtual grandmother to Rebecca and their embrace of Erich into the family defied the “blood” ties implicit to “family.” \textit{Home}’s characters suggest that idealized nuclear families and well-worn mythologies of assimilation and tolerance are inadequate for the new questions counterculture politics asked about U.S. citizenship. \textit{Home} only mildly alludes to the specific Vietnam context of hippiedom but the characters’ domestic and sexual interrogations emerge from a war-inspired clash of cultural values. The domestic alienation \textit{Home}’s characters experience is a multi-generational microcosm of broader counterculture questions about the national ways of life fostered by a militarized national culture. \textit{Home}’s characters struggle to confront and interrogate the limits of prefabricated gender and sex roles which subtly reflects the psychic hegemony of the cultural enforcement and naturalization of these roles and lifeways. The fluid family \textit{Home} presents is a literary concoction but not a simple contrived utopian construct. Rather Cunningham imagines a series of workable structures that use complex notions of sex, love, friendship, and parenting as metaphors for re-imaging U.S. citizenship as a process of critique and creation.

Both novels present the fallout from the nuclear family ideal or “broken homes” in different war-torn (WWII and Vietnam) eras. The Levovs idealize home as a haven from the world. Merry’s internal questioning and external terrorist acts destabilize the family but is only one of several transgressions including Seymour and Dawn’s extramarital affairs. “Home” is broken because the Levovs betray postwar ideals of assimilation and mobility, they have never interrogated. \textit{Home}’s characters openly confront the limits and failures of traditional family. The Morrow family’s deaths, Alice’s marital dissatisfaction, and Jonathan’s struggles with his sexuality are the impetus for the characters to rethink the stability they have been socialized to anticipate. Broken homes herald new horizons for the characters whereas family trauma destroys the Levovs.

In the contemporary “family values” political climate fragmented families serve as a particularly volatile metaphor for the breakdown of families and by implication, American society. As extreme as this conservative formulation may
Infantile citizenships

The emergence of Pastoral and Home's critique of ethnic erasure and sexual transgression in the 1990s directly parallels the emergence of the "intimate public sphere." Berlant argues that, "... the intimate public sphere of the U.S. present tense renders citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere." (Berlant 1997, 5) Ultimately within the paradigm politicians and mass media discourage citizens from engaging with historically mediated economic and social discrimination because they lack the titillation of emotion driven social issues.

In conjunction with the erasure of history and the downplaying of structures emerges what she defines as the new ideal citizen—the American infant. According to Berlant:

... the nation's value is figured not on behalf of an actually existing and laboring adult, but of a future American, both incipient and pre-historical; especially invested with this hope are the American fetus and the American child. What constitutes their national superconjunctivity is an image of an American, perhaps the last living American, not yet bruised by history; not yet caught up in the processes of secularization and sexualization; not yet caught in the confusing and exciting identity exchanges made possible by mass consumption and ethnic, racial, and sexual mixing; not yet tainted by money or war... This national icon is still innocent of knowledge, agency, and accountability and thus ethical claims on the adult political agents who write laws, make culture, administer resources, control things.

But most important, the fetal/infantile person is a stand-in for a complicated and contradictory set of anxieties and desires about national identity. (Berlant 1997, 8)

It is in this territory—the complicated and contradictory—that both novels' infant and infant-like characters raise useful questions about families and citizenship.

Berlant's notion of the infantile citizen is particularly relevant to Pastoral because Roth indirectly challenges the validity of the infantile model through Merry. Seymour and Dawn attempted to raise the very kind of ideal citizen Berlant formulates— one devoid of political subjectivity or social awareness. Merry resisted her parents' efforts but had no force to temper and redirect her anger. If Roth acutely parodies the extremes of misguided radicalism he also skewers the notion of a U.S. citizen immune or indifferent to the histories that have made U.S. citizenship so contentious. Merry's descent is not exclusively the result of radical leftist ideology gone awry; rather it is the by-product of a
particularly modern American postwar mentality—translated in families and supported by societal institutions—that attempts to pretend there is no need for change, disruption, questioning or subversion. Such a perceptive lens devalues and demonizes informed citizenship as threatening rather than progressive. Questioning, challenging, and protesting are the very gestures postwar social movements enacted to advance U.S. citizenship. These challenges to the balance of social power could not be ignored hence conservative appropriations of Reagan era activism in the form of “a nationalist politics of intimacy, which it contrasts to threatening practices of nonfamilial sexuality and by implication, other forms of racial and economic alterity.” (Berlant 1997, 7) Pastoral’s strongest political thread is its implied critique of citizenship as “a category of feeling irrelevant to practices of hegemony or sociality in everyday life.” (Berlant 1997, 11)

Home brilliantly subverts Berlant’s theory by illustrating the transformative possibilities of intimacy and the potential for progressive citizenship within social structures like families and friendships. Home’s characters are rarely political in the traditional sense; rather their social interactions operate stealthily. The seemingly naïve and docile infant Bobby best exemplifies the stealth model in his deft reconfigurations of his personal trauma into community. Cunningham has sketched Home’s characters in subtle ways that can easily obscure the radical structures of their lives. The complex sexual and familial boundaries of Bobby and Jonathan’s relationship, Jonathan’s questioning of how relationships constrain “love,” Alice’s conscious critiques of her traditional American family life, and Bobby, Jonathan and Clare’s collective subversion/confusion of gender roles in raising Rebecca are poignant sociopolitical challenges to family, sexuality and gender enveloped in a deceptively utopian narrative. In Home intimate spaces and relationships embody social radicalism in a functional manner. Berlant’s infant ideal is a particularly useful framework for discussing child and adult behaviors in the novels. I begin my discussion by describing the novels’ infant citizens—Merry who acts as a baby anarchist and Rebecca, an actual baby. I also explore the poignant role of families in initiating the children into national citizenship through exploring the adult infants Bobby and Seymour. I conclude by discussing the ethical implications of family structures.

Adult infants and their children

In Pastoral a spoiled adult infant, (Seymour) begets a disruptive infant (Merry). Seymour, the “All-American” proverbial winner fails to nurture Merry, a social outsider and the winner’s assimilationist dreams literally explode. In Home a signifying/defiant adult infant (Bobby) begets a progressive infant (Rebecca). Home’s sexual outsiders raise Rebecca in an improvised family environment that nurtures a child who seems poised to reconcile structure with possibility.

Seymour’s childrearing of his half-Jewish/half-Catholic daughter Merry functions as a cautionary tale about infantile citizens. Seymour fails to acknowledge how he is implicated in the lament that after three generations of growth “with the fourth it had all come to nothing. The total vandalization of their world.” (Roth 1997, 237) Roth illustrates what is lost when generational progress is actually generational forgetting. Merry is a disruptive infant raised by dedicated conformists. Everything she knows about being a citizen is warped. The dominant message her parents convey is that generality is more important than articulating boundaries and correcting imperfection is less important than questioning what defines perfection.

When Seymour first asks for his father Lou’s approval of his shiksa wife Lou interrogates Dawn and demands they determine the child’s religious heritage. Though Dawn feigns indifference to Catholicism and promises not to baptize Merry, they secretly do. (Roth 1997, 389, 396) Better she lives as a quasi-Catholic than a full-fledged Jew or anything concrete—her parents’ refusal to provide Merry with an identity to engage with is central to her anger. No matter how hard the Levys try to blend in half-Jewish, overweight, stuttering Merry will never be “normal” like her former beauty pageant mother and star athlete father. She is perpetually inadequate because she is physically and verbally noticeable—the opposite of the assimilated body. When Seymour confronts a dirty, starving Jainist-identified Merry at the novel’s end she has lost weight and stopped stuttering and he sees that “Everything she could not achieve with a speech therapist and a psychiatrist and a stuttering diary she had beautifully realized by going mad.” (Roth 1997, 246) Merry’s ultimate subversion is her public engagement. Her confrontational instincts defy Seymour’s long held goal of invisibility. As a high school sophomore Seymour has privatized, capitalist nuclear family dreams, “At school he’d find himself thinking about which girl in each of his classes to marry and take to live with him . . . he would imagine himself going home after work to that house back of the trees and seeing his daughter there, his little daughter high up in the air on the swing he’d built for her. Though he was only a high school sophomore, he could imagine a daughter of his own running to kiss him, see her flinging herself at him, see himself carrying her on his shoulders . . . .” (Roth 1997, 190) Young adulthood did not temper this fantasy as he, “was fully charged up with purpose long, long before anyone else he knew, with a grown man’s aims and ambitions, someone who excitedly foresaw, in perfect detail, the outcome of his story.” (Roth 1997, 192)
Several benchmark family and school moments define Merry’s growth into anarchy. First, narrator Zuckerman recalls an episode where Merry demands to be kissed like her father kisses her mother. Seymour, raised to follow orders and avoid confrontation relents and kisses Merry. In this scenario the adult without boundaries is more problematic than the precocious child. By appeasing Merry Seymour protects himself from making a moral decision rather than providing her with a reasonable sense of propriety. (Roth 1997, 91, 240) Responsibility and ethical propriety materialize as value neutral negotiations, misguided notions that prove fatal for Merry and haunt Seymour. Second, Dawn and Seymour enroll Merry in a series of corrective activities, such as speech therapy to normalize her. (Roth 1997, 95-96) Merry publicly embarrasses her parents, especially Dawn, because she presents an ambiguous and challenging new ethnic and social position for them. She is born an outsider and has a limited drive for the assimilation her parents crave.

Third, in middle school Merry questions her teacher on an assignment and is informed by her teacher that she has “a stubborn streak” (Roth 1997, 248). Her parents never question the teacher’s judgment but view Merry’s probing intelligence as charming. As a teenager her classmates also call her Ho Chi Levov because she is overweight and enraged by Vietnam. (Roth 1997, 100) The Levovs never fully engage Merry’s initial humanistic passion. As she struggles to understand the cruelty of Vietnam any semblance of her parents’ maturation under wartime circumstances are absent, and she is left alone and directionless to process without support.

Fourth, when Merry openly critiques America her second generation grandfather encourages her to write letters rather than propose outright destruction and her third generation father distantly moderates. (Roth 1997, 285-91) Lou and Seymour never reveal themselves to her; Lou attempts to reason with her but abstracts the personal toll of war and Seymour disengages entirely. Presuming a direct causal relationship parents’ child raising intentions and a child’s behavior is aimless. However these benchmark episodes reiterate how her lack of definition and guidance inspire a destructive intelligence ungrounded in any sense of self beyond her assimilationist family. She is culturally anomalous in relation to her family’s aspiration. Seymour wonders, “Who had enlisted her and lured her into this?” since she was “Blessed with a loving and ethical and prosperous family.” (Roth 1997, 248) The Levovs’ inability to nurture and engage Merry as a person rather than a symbol reveals the ugly side of postwar assimilationist dreams—an unbalanced, indiscreet child raised to believe there are no boundaries or limits by people still trapped by historic stigmas they can never transcend and will never question. Rather than questioning their stake in a nation with an ambiguous history toward religious and ethnic difference the Levovs are vigorously complicit. The postwar era symbolically and materially afforded them a new sense of belonging but a lingering psychic insecurity about social acceptance inspires a policing of social propriety and suspicion toward disruption. At an early ‘70s dinner party toward the end of Pastoral Seymour’s obsequious, self-righteous second generation Jewish father laments the incendence of Deep Throat (1972), a response echoed by Bill O’Reeut a blueblood architect whom Seymour has discovered as Dawn’s secret paramour. In response a stereotypically “obnoxious” literature professor, Marcia Umanoff, proclaims, “Without transgression there is no knowledge.” (Roth 1997, 360) Predictably the houseguests are befuddled by her response.

In Home Bobby’s co-parenting of daughter Rebecca is less about the literal childrearing than the traumatic experiences that precede his parenting. Having witnessed the deaths of his immediately family, the domestic disappointment of his adoptive mother Alice, and Jonathan and Clare’s struggles with sexuality and love he is leery of the assumed stability and health of the American nuclear family. When he, Jonathan and Clare move to a hamlet in Woodstock to raise Rebecca they lay a crucial groundwork for the future citizen or progressive infant. Futurity is a key theme of Home and Rebecca is its symbolic and material manifestation.

The contrast between Bobby and Clare’s raising of Rebecca reflects their personas in significant ways. Clare, who grows increasingly frustrated with the living arrangement, comes to terms with her identity as a bohemian poser and 40 something woman who has always rejected traditional domesticity but craves it. Clare is in love with Jonathan, who is gay, and Bobby who is too consumed with fulfilling everyone’s emotional needs and desires to commit solely to her. Clare wants to prevent Rebecca from following her path and takes on a fiercely protective, rather than nurturing stance. Clare says:

I found that I loved her without a true sense of charity or goodwill. It was a howling, floodlit love; a frightening thing. I would shield her from a speeding car but I’d curse her as I did it, like a prisoner cursing the executioner.  
(Cunningham 1990, 274)

Clare’s investment in protection and sheltering makes parenthood a terrifying prospect. She wants to protect Rebecca. But the notion of nurturing is more frightening because it is unfamiliar and must be created. Such a reactionary stance reproduces an investment in what seems safe, stable and secure—traditional family structures—but often leaves people feeling dissatisfied. Clare imagines for Rebecca that:

Someday she’d pay a fortune to therapists for their help in solving the mystery of my personality. There would be plenty of material—a mother living with two men, intricately in love with both of men. An undecided, disorganized woman
who fell out of every conventional arrangement. Who dragged her own childhood along with her into her forties. (Cunningham 1990, 274)

However Rebecca seems well adjusted—the unconventional trio is all she has ever known and appears natural. This is an important contrast with Clare who grew up in a traditional but dysfunctional nuclear family. Unable to reconcile either situation Clare’s default response is protection; her response seems more about self-protection and assurance than Rebecca. The “undecided” comment is her moment of truth—her self-confessed discomfort with the ambiguity of living in Woodstock.

In contrast Bobby always approaches their lives as ambiguous. As they move in he declares, “We are forces of order, come from the city with talents and tools and our belief in a generous future,” a metaphor for his role as an improviser. (Cunningham 1990, 264) Similarly, when Clare confronts him about his frustrating emotional availability he responds, “I am part of the living and part of the dead. I am living for more people than just myself.” (Cunningham 1990, 272) Lest this sound too airy Clare appreciates his parenting noting:

Bobby loved our daughter but was not tormented by her vulnerable, noisy existence. . . . He had that religious quality, He was soft-hearted and intensely focused. He was not deeply interested in the flesh. Sometimes when he held Rebecca I knew how he saw her—as a citizen in his future world. He respected her for swelling the population but did not agonize over particulars of her fate. In his eyes, she was part of a movement. (Cunningham 1990, 276)

Clare has a pragmatic, immediate investment in the tangible, structured and safe paralleling broader cultural investments in linearity and inherited structures. Bobby sees the future as something more ambiguous depending on how people transform rather than adhere to prefabricated rules. He models an improvisational foundation for Rebecca where engaging with danger, vulnerability and the unexpected are more useful tools than reliance on abstractions like “shelter and protection.” Bobby sees Rebecca as not merely his child but a citizen who will have to engage with and become a part of a broader society not shelter herself from it. These philosophical differences lead Clare to abandon Woodstock when she realizes the limits of her bohemian pose.

Regarding the actual child the characters describe her as the opposite of Merry—balanced. Clare comments:

She needed, and with growing vehemence, resented my protection. I only needed her safety but I needed it completely, all the time. . . She wept if I watched her too closely, and wept if she realized that for a moment I’d forgotten to watch her at all. (Cunningham 1990, 278)

If Clare is too protective and Bobby too abstract, Rebecca balances their seeming excesses—she is a baby with palpable subjectivity. Bobby describes Rebecca’s temperament and physicality noting, “Already, at eleven months, she has a nature. She is prone to contemplation. She resists both laughter and sorrow until they overwhelm her, and then she gives herself up completely.” (Cunningham 1990, 265) Clare notes how, “It seemed that every day she developed a new gesture or response that carried her much closer to her own eventual personality. From hour to hour she kept turning more fully into somebody.” (Cunningham 1990, 276) Bobby and Clare most favorably describe Rebecca’s relationship with co-parent Jonathan. Bobby notes how, “Of all her qualities, Jonathan is most in love with her capacity for amazement.” (Cunningham 1990, 265-66)

Adults who seemingly disengage from their surrounding environments can be loosely interpreted as adult infants. By definition they represent innocence or, more troublingly an aversion to “knowledge, agency, and accountability.” (Berlant 1997, 8) One of the most striking and significant aspects Pastoral and Home share are their depictions of Bobby and Seymour in terms that allude to infant-like behavior. Seymour represents the infant as passive, dependent, selfish and helpless. In essence he is what I term a spoiled infant who refuses to grow up. Like Berlant’s idealized infant he is content to passively embrace national mythologies—particularly American assimilation as a form of ease and the private, nuclear family as a protective space from broader political and social realities. Though Seymour inherits the family business he never builds from his heritage or develops what Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky defines as, “a new, unpredicted yet vital phase of Jewish history.” American Jewish identity. According to Rubin-Dorsky, “In America Jews can be deeply committed to the values, aspirations, and meanings embodied in Jewish history while at the same time remaining loyal to American institutions that ensure democratic freedoms.” (Rubin-Dorsky 2001, 79-80) Driven by a linear view of assimilation Seymour being an “American who happens to be Jewish” subsumes American Jewish identity. Where the Levovs raised their eyebrows at the value of transgression Bobby would raise his glass.

Bobby represents the wonder, optimism and possibility of the pre-socialized infant. However he transforms the vacuousness of infancy to a mode of creation and transformation. In this respect Bobby is a rebel disguised as an innocent—or what I term a signifying infant. (Gates 1988, 51) Throughout the novel characters refer to Bobby as an infant including Jonathan’s initial description of Bobby’s face as “nakedly fearful as a baby’s” and Clare who labels him “half child, an innocent.” (Cunningham 1990, 47, 166) However as characters familiarize themselves with him they realize he is smart, subsersive and purposeful. Bobby emotionally grasps pre-conceived expectations and
improvises around these to create new knowledges, which is an ethically-motivated choice that opens new possibilities for his community.

**Social ethics and kinship: conclusion**

If the post-WWII period catalyzed a racial and ethnic redefinition of who comprises the American family the Vietnam inspired 1960s counterculture publicly questioned the ability of traditional nuclear families, as a way of life, to provide fulfillment and advance citizenship ideals. The quest for increased social access and recognition which fueled these pivotal social movements endures in a context of reified American nationalism. In *Pastoral*, Roth suggests the counterculture had a necessary political spirit but lacked a sustainable social vision. Within *Home* counterculture politics broadly motivate Bobby but it is through sexuality, friendship and family—rather than overt politics—that an alternative social logic emerges. The highly visible, nationalistic unity rhetoric of the postwar era obscured deep cultural divisions under the guise of increased social access and the promotion of national ways of life. Implicit in this rhetoric was the inference of social equality and psychic reconciliation with patterns of discrimination. Vietnam awakened these dormant inconsistencies via a broad political critique largely defined by a cultural rejection of enforced social roles. The cultural tensions which emerged during the era spanning the postwar and Vietnam eras spurred a range of questions that have altered the contours of national intimacies.

The *Home* and *Pastoral* comparison is historically useful because Seymour grows into adulthood in an era when religious and “ethnic” identity are perceived as declining barriers. But the actual transformative work to reduce these prejudices is an active process not simply a mythology to be fulfilled. Seymour’s focus on individualism stymies his sense of how to achieve an identity that queers “American” identity by challenging WASP assimilation as the national racial, ethnic and religious core. Merry, whom Seymour’s brother Jerry refers to as a symbol of Seymour and Dawn’s social experiment, is a fragmented, dislocated, and ultimately destructive citizen who inherits staid narratives of assimilation rather than possibilities for developing the new modes of citizenship her parents bypass on their assimilation excursion. (Roth 1997, 272-81) The symbolism is chilling because it represents the reproduction of generations of dissatisfied citizens encouraged to suppress difference for the sake of citizenship that negates their particularity.

Even though race and ethnicity are easily perceived as more salient categories of discrimination than gender and sexual difference, less attention has been focused on how queer social practices model valuable forms of community and culture building that redefine possibilities of citizenship. Bobby and Seymour’s differences illuminate tensions between two familial modes battling for acceptance in the intimate public sphere. There is an imagined apolitical, de-ethnicized, private American nuclear family insulated from history because of the “order” and “stability” it inherently offers. In contrast are more exploratory, public/memorial formations that employ community, multiplicity and flexibility as the basis for progressive citizenship. The legal vulnerabilities and social stigmas non-traditional kinship systems face are realistic barriers. But their lies in the ways “choice” challenges and reconstructs kinship and family on personal and affirming terms which represent a larger potential for active resistance to intimate traumas.

The subversion of gender roles and the emphasis on community over blood defines *Home’s* progressive family. The ways Alice functions as an adoptive mother for Bobby and grandmother to Rebecca and Erich’s presence exemplifies the way queer communities have nurtured each other during the AIDS crisis illustrate how family and home function as elastic concepts. *Home*’s queer family ultimately illustrates the possibility for ethical living beyond nuclear family structures. The intricacies of *Home*’s family configurations and Rebecca the individual character are less important than the provocative and pragmatic social possibilities it presents.

In the neoconservative climate of the last three decades there remains a need for sexual minorities and the unique kinship systems they create/inhabit to gain access to the public sphere. In the face of an imagined and idealized national uniformity such kinship systems are an essential tool to gaining political footing in the intimate public sphere. Their identities and values are not merely alternatives to nuclear families but formations stemming from vital historical disruptions that have gradually redefined sexuality, gender roles and family structures. Liberal politics has abandoned the counterculture ethos for political moderation, thus the value of progressive social formations is obscured. Comparing *Pastoral* and *Home* illustrates how a wider range of kinship systems are essential because they complement key postwar movements that have redefined the potential of citizenship. Social conceptions of family need to transition from generic structures that create bodies to occupy, consume and reproduce to a space that can operate independently of traditional generationality. Re-imagining family as an ethical space where adults nurture children as future citizens, rather than generational receptacles, could enable a transition in cultural discourse toward a more nuanced recognition of how children are engaged. Such transitioning could also open up a critical space for progressives to articulate the ethical value of child rearing where transgression is a social necessity that enriches and prepares young citizens for the unresolved historical tensions and conflicts they have inherited and must negotiate. Now is the future our children are building, what tools are societies supplying?
accept what the new American nationalism seemed to offer: minorities would be allowed into society if they adopted the manners and culture of Protestant Christians, or if they became "universal men." This "bargain" was accepted, with variations, by two brilliant young Jewish writers of the war years, Arthur Miller and Saul Bellow." (Hertzberg, 1997, 292)


5 Most writers have referred to Zuckerman as Roth's alter ego however Norman Podhoretz has suggested Zuckerman is Roth's "alter brain," see 2000. "Bellow at 85, Roth at 67," Commentary, July-August, 36; Roth, Pastoral, 20.

6 Rubin-Dorsky responded to narrow critical attempts to reduce Pastoral to an anti-60s screed, "Unfortunately, in the hands of ideological critics of both persuasions, American Pastoral instead became a critique of the hedonistic, undisciplined 1960s to the chagrin of Todd Gitlin on the left, to the delight of Norman Podhoretz on the right... They were both wrong." (Rubin-Dorsky 2001, 96) Parrish also noted, "Roth's postmodern definition of self makes it difficult for his reader to assert with any confidence that his books endorse a particular point of view or cultural position." (Parrish 2000, 85)

7 Alice described Bobby's response to Burt Morrow's death as, "He did not move. He stood on the lawn beside a black-coated fireman. As Ned and I ran to him, Bobby watched us with his old numbed uncomprehending expression; that foreigner's look." (Cunningham 1990, 104; Jonathon commented on Bobby's response to the Morrow gravesites during a stop in Cleveland, "Bobby gazed at the stones with a simple and almost impersonal respect, like a tourist visiting a shrine. By now his mourning was over and he'd fallen away from the ongoing process of his family's demise." and "If he was not quite somber, he had grown more blank— it was his old response to sorrow... Bobby could withdraw from the surface of his skin." In these vacant states he said and did nothing different. His speech and actions continued unimpaired. But something in him departed, the living sap went out, and he took on a slumbering quality that might have been mistaken for stupidity by someone who knew him less." (Cunningham 1990, 251, 252)

8 "It came to me that death itself could be a more distant form of participation in the continuing history of the world. Death could be like this, a simultaneous presence and absence while your friends continued to chat among the lamps and furniture about someone who was no longer you," (Cunningham 1990, 152); "Although we think of the dead inhabiting the past, I now believe they exist in an undying present. There is no hope of better things to come. There is no memory of the human progress that led to each moment," (Cunningham 1990, 214).


10 Ball's discussion distinguishes moral evaluations from judgments and defines morality as a politically urgent stance for gays and lesbians who, "have learned to use their same-
gender sexuality as a source for both building lives of self-respect and pride for organizing politically to seek social change," (Ball 2003, 11) He describes elements of “A Gay and Lesbian Sexual Ethic,” 204-17.

Works Cited


Introduction: Everyday spectacles and permanent war

The public secret of the bomb in America is out, but do not tell anyone, for its secrecy is part of the appeal. Across the country nuclear weapons have made a comeback as memorials, museums and tourist excursions. In July of 2005 I was in the midst of a period of fieldwork on the nuclear public sphere in America, investigating the public sites of the nuclear secret and the ways in which these places both affected the body and the body politic in the America.1 Unlike with Vietnam where United States was unable to turn its own suffering easily into spectacle, World War Two, the Cold War and atomic and nuclear weapons specifically, are increasingly the subject of nationalistic memorial enterprise (Rogin 1990). These impulses, presented under the rubric of clear and moral victory, national heroism and patriotism, national security, and the saving of American lives and, perhaps more importantly, the American way of life are themselves not free from the ambiguities and doubts which haunt America’s Vietnam War memories (Berlant 1997; Sturken 1997). Increasingly, as the memorial and “exhibitionary complex” around atomic and nuclear weapons expands, so do fault lines and traumas emerge (Bennett 1988).

It was in Los Alamos, New Mexico, in 1943, where the heart of the Manhattan District project – the codename for America’s top secret effort to build the first atomic bomb- was established. The summer of 2005 marked a temporal moment when the still open wounds of history and the underlying cultural politics of memorializing such traumas were fleetingly revealed. That summer was, of course, the sixtieth anniversary of both the development and employment of atomic weapons in New Mexico and Japan, respectively. Whereas elsewhere the sixtieth anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were met with somber memorializations, in New Mexico the