

Panel Proposal for the *DGfA Annual Conference 2026, Münster*: “Kinship in American Studies”

Autokinship: Discourses and Practices in U.S. American Culture and History

Abstract

From an 1835 lithograph encouraging the young to form early bonds with their imagined older selves to the mainstream self-help practice of “inner child work” in the twenty first century, we have long been urged to develop and nurture relationships with our selves across the life course—the very closest of kin who have been ‘othered’ by time. The late modern era’s great redefining of age, time, and selfhood prompted this inclination, which remains sharply relevant today. As the age of connection paradoxically incites relational breakdowns and a loneliness epidemic traversing generations takes hold, the pressure to cultivate a relationship with oneself—“the most important relationship you will ever have,” a contemporary aphorism maintains—is amplifying. But do these self-relationships attempt to replace or to facilitate traditional notions of kinship and connection with others outside oneself? In which ways have Americans endeavored to build ongoing relationships with themselves, through which material and discursive forms, by which impetuses, and to what ends? Have the fragmented, ‘liquid’ qualities of the late modern self and time which were already incited by the nineteenth century shift to industrial life paired with the modern project of teleological progress forged this singular form of kinship—“autokinship”—into being?

This panel seeks proposals that engage with the cultural phenomenon of “autokinship,” a neologism this panel introduces to facilitate discussion of a distinct practice in the U.S. American sphere. In the spirit of scholarship that has reimagined the scope of kinship beyond traditional frameworks, this inquiry probes the parameters of kinship and expands the possibilities of relationality—this time, inward. Can one be in relation with oneself in a way that mirrors kinship? What might kin-like care toward the self make possible? If parts of the multi-dimensional subject are disavowed by the self, others, or society (e.g., the aging self; the affectively alien self, in Ahmed’s terms) when might engaging in “autokinship” be a reparative act of agency? Is the turn toward “autokinship” a creative relational strategy in alienating times and places, or is it a form of biopolitical self-governance that reinforces neoliberal logic and individual isolation? When might “autokinship” foster an ethos of connection with the world beyond the self, and when might it displace other forms of kinship? Probing these questions illuminates cultural values and epistemologies underpinning American relations with the self—a lens through which the act of human kinship, whether with human, more-than-human, or posthuman others, is mediated.

Proposals are welcome from literary studies, history, cultural studies, philosophy, and interdisciplinary scholarship that draw on any variety of methods and theoretical frameworks and consider the role of social position. Papers are encouraged on a range of contexts, including but not limited to: narrative self-representation in life writing and fiction, psychological humanities and self-help discourse, decolonial and postcolonial theory, queer and feminist theory, and age and aging studies. In approaching the topic of kinship-style relations with the self in American culture, participants may choose to address the above questions or offer unique interpretations.

Panel Information

Panel Organizer and Contact: Katie Jacques, University of Kassel, katie.jacques@uni-kassel.de
Confirmed Panel Chair and Moderator: Prof. Dr. Mischa Honeck, University of Kassel
Confirmed Panel Speaker: Katie Jacques, University of Kassel

Panel Organizer and First Confirmed Speaker Bio:

Katie Jacques is a doctoral candidate writing a cultural history of age in the U.S. from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Era with expected submission in winter 2025. In 2021 after earning her MA in American Studies at the Humboldt University of Berlin she began her doctorate in a DFG project at the University of Kassel's department of history. Since 2023 she holds a doctoral scholarship from the University of Kassel. Jacques' research focuses include critical age studies, cultural embodiment, and late modern U.S. American culture, literature, and history.

Panel Chair and Moderator Bio:

Mischa Honeck is Professor of North American History at the University of Kassel. His research interests include U.S. American and transatlantic histories of age and nation-building. His latest monograph, *No Country for Old Age* (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2025), explores historical conjectures and connections between rejuvenation projects aimed at revitalizing individual bodies and those dedicated to renewing collective bodies, such as nations and empires, from eighteenth century Valley Forge to twenty-first century Silicon Valley.

Paper Proposal for the Proposed Panel “Autokinship: Discourses and Practices in U.S. American Culture” for the *DGfA Annual Conference 2026, Münster*: “Kinship in American Studies”

Towards a Theory of Autokinship? A Cultural-Historical Perspective

Abstract

Contemporary popular self-help discourse encourages fostering a relationship with the self that is not only intimate, but *familial*. Therapeutic models like “inner child work” and “self-parenting” require approaching the self as an internally multiple network of kin and inhabiting different roles simultaneously while also communicating between them. Kin-like care toward the self, these methods maintain, is key for self-discovery and personal transformation—both long-standing and continuously intensifying social imperatives. To practice “autokinship” is hard work, as it requires a honed ability to approach the self as both subject and object, to actively engage in the emotional labor of (auto) “kinwork” (di Leonardo), to invoke parts of the self othered by time and circumstance, and to build an internal narrative of life course continuity against the tide of social acceleration that increasingly fragments time and selfhood.

This paper historicizes the idea of “autokinship” by homing in on its major manifestations and cultural underpinnings since the nineteenth century, effectively establishing a working lineage and definition for this enduring and evolving practice. My research traces the dynamic of mentally and affectively externalizing parts of the self and forging kin-like relations between them, from Dickens’ novella “A Christmas Carol” (1843) to RuPaul’s memoir *The House of Hidden Meanings* (2022). I ultimately argue that one of “autokinship’s” primary functions is to fulfill the role that religious redemption once offered, albeit in a secular setting still shaped by religious frameworks. While the impulse to reconcile the self appears across diverse cultures, the processes of doing so are culturally and historically shaped. Drawing on the history of life writing, literary fiction, aging, and psychology along the backdrop of major cultural shifts, I show how modernity has expanded kinship beyond necessitating an-other outside the self. At a moment when digital life and posthuman prospects urge us to interrogate the very meaning of the human, this paper offers renewed reflection on the boundaries of both selfhood and relationship.