

## Kinship and Civil War from 1861 to the Present

Proposal for a workshop at the 72<sup>nd</sup> annual meeting of the GAAS in Münster, 2026

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Even though nationality is such an abstract way of imagining community that it is thoroughly detached from familial relations and other small-scale constellations, nationalist discourse routinely invokes tropes of kinship in constructing this imagination, most notably in common tropes of national brotherhood, of the nation-state as a benevolent or overreaching parent, and of children as a way of imagining futurity and national continuity. In short, nationalism heavily relies on invoking kinship as a way of imagining a community that is actually not defined by it at all, which at best results in a harmless metaphor and at worst results in exclusionary, discriminatory practices that not only define belonging but also its opposite.

Our proposed workshop wants to explore this tension inherent to nationalist discourse by considering a particularly salient example of its crisis, the violent eruption and symbolic condensation of an issue that is otherwise managed in various ways: civil war. While the general framework outlined above may apply to any national discourse, we particularly want to consider the US-American Civil War (1861–65) as a unique moment of national crisis to ask how it was and is represented in terms of kinship. Where do we find the rhetoric of familial relations, and who is and isn't included in it? (Think of the sisters in the war of brother against brother, or the four million former slaves that certainly complicated white notions of what counted as the American family.) Who invokes such tropes of kinship, how, to what end, and in which contexts? Such invocations may occur in any medium, from photography and poetry, to cartoons and journals, film and fiction; and they may be public or private. How does the rhetoric and imagery of kinship address the violent rupture in the American national imagination, serving the purposes of either reconciliation or separation? How did this representation change over time as the Civil War was itself reframed and reintegrated into an imagination of national continuity? (See Blight's *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* and Berry's more recent volume, *Weirding the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges*.)

At the same time, we suggest that the violent condensation of an exclusionary American nationalism that invokes kinship in order to police the boundaries of who is and isn't (or shouldn't be) a member of the community isn't limited to the Civil War but also can be found in lower-case civil war as a contemporary trope of cultural polarization. Catalyzed and fueled by the aggressive rhetoric of Trumpism, but certainly a much older aspect of American political culture, the imagination of two opposing and indeed irreconcilable sides continues to haunt American democratic culture. Presently, the trope of civil war can be invoked as a political gambit to deploy the national guard in American cities, or as the core metaphor of an imagination of extreme cultural differences (see Marche's essays in *The Next Civil War: Dispatches from the American Future*, 2022, or Garland's film *Civil War*, 2024).

We ask how national kinship rhetoric functions in this current climate of perpetual disagreement and how it relates to the earlier moment of extreme polarization in the US where two sides actually did go to war with each other. Our combined interest in the Civil War and in our contemporary imagination of civil war is historical, cultural, literary, political, and didactic, and we explicitly invite contributions from any of the disciplinary specializations in American studies.