

Children, Childhood, and Critical Modalities of Kinship

Panel co-organized by **Mahshid Mayar** (Innsbruck) & **Layla Koch** (Heidelberg)

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Kinship is political and contested. So is childhood. In an attempt at exploring their critical convergences within the field of American Studies, **Children, Childhood, and Critical Modalities of Kinship** invites contributions that examine how these historically dense and politically charged categories are co-constructed and deployed as sites of political control, social order, and cultural reproduction in the formation of the United States and its projects.

We begin with the premise that childhood is not merely a developmental phase, but a key site through which kinship is imagined, regulated, and contested. It has laid at the heart of political projects that shape the boundaries of belonging and exclusion. Kinship, too, is a political practice—structured by power, institutions, and ideologies that determine who is included and who is rendered disposable or barred from familial or national imaginaries.

Across multiple historical contexts—in frontier huts, on plantations, in “unincorporated” territories, in urban spaces, and within the institutional apparatuses of child welfare, foster care, and schooling—the child has been simultaneously a subject of kinship and a tool of political and cultural reproduction. This framing of childhood as both a site of care and a point of contestation invites critical attention to how children have been variously positioned in relation to state power and violence and the racial and gendered logics of kinship that have shaped American society, literature, and culture.

Moreover, central to the American project of “progress” is the use of childhood and kinship to both enforce and legitimize territorial and social expansion. In “kinship politics,” (Martini, 2022) children—especially those removed from their families—became sites of imperial and settler control that severed and replaced kinship with new systems of authority, governance, and racialized belonging. Simultaneously, empire and national expansion were legitimized through the framing of the nation-state as a familial structure, a paternal or maternal project, in which the child became emblematic of the nation’s future. (“Fictional”) kinship (Haake, 2017) has thus served as a central tool to justify territorial violence, dispossession, and colonization.

In addition to complicating American imperial history, frameworks of kinship also challenge scholars of childhood to question children’s alterity as historical, agentic subjects. Balancing children’s dependence and uniqueness, theories of children’s agency have often highlighted children’s distinct (even deficient) status to adults. This upholds an essentializing binary model of adults and children. Instead, a “kinship-model theory of agency” may highlight how fundamentally “akin” adults and children are (Gubar, 2016). Kinship therefore serves as both a methodological and theoretical lens within interdisciplinary childhood studies.

This CfP thus invites scholars to explore how the intersecting categories of kinship and childhood produce frameworks of belonging that shape the past, present, and future of the United States. How does the child, as both symbol and subject, mediate these complex dynamics of nation-building and imperial expansion? What role does kinship play in shaping narratives of racial, national, and colonial identity?

We invite interdisciplinary submissions that explore these intersections, focusing on the ways in which critical modalities of kinship and childhood have co-launched (or at least lent legitimacy to) US-American political and cultural projects of in- and exclusion. Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- The ('biological') child as a staple of (fictional) kinship rhetoric to legitimize racialization, violence, dispossession, and oppression
- The centrality of the child as a node of kinship revealing the power of age, relationality, and progress in the United States
- The figure of the child and kinship rhetoric as a means to protest and a tool of emancipation in literature, history, politics, and so on
- The child as both a figure of kinship and a tool of colonial governance in settler colonial and imperial contexts
- Childhood as a site of resistance to settler colonialism and imperialism: Indigenous, Black, and abolitionist strategies
- The space children occupy in the public imaginary as the nation's true kin: a fragile beautiful object and an antidote to its termination and extinction
- Displacement, kinship rupture, remaking of Indigenous and diasporic kinship systems
- Family as a metaphor for empire, e.g. domesticity, patriarchy, and nationhood
- Imagining kinship through decolonial, queer, and alternative familial practices
- Kinship models as methodological lenses to perceive of children's agency

We welcome scholars from across disciplines—including American Studies, childhood studies, history, literature, Indigenous studies, Black studies, and gender and sexuality studies—to engage in their proposed talks with the crossover between childhood and the critical modalities of kinship to which it contributes in the U.S. context.

Please send abstracts (ca. 300 words) and speaker bios (ca. 100 words) to both organizers, Mahshid Mayar (mahshid.mayar@uibk.ac.at) and Layla Koch (lkoch@hca.uni-heidelberg.de) by 05.01.2026.

Confirmed Speaker:

Prof. Dr. Julia Faisst (TU Dortmund) – "Kid or Kin? Contestations of Racialized Belonging and Removal in Contemporary Novels of Migration"

Cited Works

Gubar, Marah. "The Hermeneutics of Recuperation: What a Kinship-Model Approach to Children's Agency Could Do for Children's Literature and Childhood Studies." *Jeunesse* 18, no. 1 (2016): 291-310.

Haake, Claudia B. "Civilization, Law, and Customary Diplomacy: Arguments against Removal in Seneca Letters to the Federal Government." *Native Americans and Indigenous Studies* 4, no. 2 (2017): 31-51.

Martini, Elspeth. "Dangerous Proximities: Anglo-American Humanitarian Paternalism in the Era of Indigenous Removal." *The Western Historical Quarterly* 53 (2022): 379-404.