

## 72<sup>nd</sup> Annual Meeting of the GAAS “Kinship in American Studies”

### Workshop Proposal: Queer Affective Kinships in Contemporary American Literature

**Chairs:** Anne Stellberger, University of Bayreuth; Lukas Hellmuth, University of Würzburg

Since the legalization of gay marriage in the US and large parts of Western societies in the course of the 2000s and 2010s, the notion of queer kinship as a disruptive form of relating has come into question. However, the nuclear family and hetero-reproductive marriages are still socially privileged and economically as well as politically subsidized. Alternative forms of kinships still have to find their own way of existing and building infrastructures of mutual support and care (see e.g., Ettensohn, “Kinship in the Contemporary Queer Novel of Care”). The “cruel optimism” of attachments to traditional forms of kinship as “objects of desire” that promise to fulfil the fantasy of the “good life” (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 23-24) find their repetition in the stories we tell. Thinking with Lauren Berlant, in what ways, then, have queer kinships themselves become cruelly optimistic through accommodation of non-heterosexual forms of family into mainstream capitalist patriarchal systems and how are stories about alternative kinships told without reproducing these fantasies?

This workshop is interested in looking at queer kinship in the contemporary moment of ongoing crisis through an affective lens. As Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman state, “[q]ueer theory has always been a theory of kinship” (1). Thus, any form of theoretical undertaking in relation to queer existence always entails an engagement with matters of sociality and belonging, both in accordance with established kinship structures and in butting against them repeatedly. Thinking about kinship along queer lines, then, as Bradway and Freeman argue, “weaves critique with imagination to dream belonging otherwise” (2), already entailing a negotiation of the affects intrinsic to these alternative imaginations. This affective investment finds its expression not only in queer theorizing but also in literary and cultural production. Sarah Ahmed’s work illustrates how these emotional attachments are all tied to forms of kinship, arguing for the consideration of the socio-political dimensions of affect. Here, the framing of normative forms of kinship such as the family as happy object becomes a matter of necessary queer critique (Ahmed 21). This workshop focuses on the ways in which a reading through a queer affective lens allows for an alternative approach to kinship, finding expression in contemporary US-American literature and arguably expanding and reorienting the concept itself.

Focusing on affective queer kinship foregrounds the interaction between queerness and kinship beyond strict social arrangements. As theorists such as Berlant and Ahmed highlight, a queer conceptualization of kinship always already entails complex emotional attachments, regardless of their specific form of sociality. Literature, then, becomes a site in which emotions, feelings, and affective experiences of belonging are not only articulated but constantly renegotiated, embedded in a multitude of formal and genre specifics. As Berlant argues, literary and cultural productions carry the promise and danger of creating intimate publics between producers, texts, and readership based on their affective experience (*The Female Complaint* 172). Contemporary texts allow for the renegotiation of these experiences and affective attachments, offering explorations of conflict with traditional notions of kinship and the kinds of (un)belonging they create for the queer subject. This workshop wants to take advantage of the affordances of contemporary literature and explore how these affective dynamics can be conceptualized and what forms of belonging they make visible or render precarious.

A growing body of contemporary literature negotiates kinship and opens space for queer readings. These texts that engage meaningfully with questions of queer kinship, affective relationality, and interdependent care include *A Little Life* (2015) by Hanya Yanagihara, *The Argonauts* (2015) by Maggie Nelson, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) by Ocean Vuong, *Day* (2023) by Micheal Cunningham, or *Small Rain* (2024) by Garth Greenwell, not to speak of a multitude of speculative and genre fiction that adds to these discourses as well. In all of these novels, the construction of (chosen) family becomes a central site for exploring the affordances and limits of queer kinship. They show the need for an intersectional approach to affective care, considering a spectrum of aspects ranging from queerness, class, and disability. Furthermore, they discuss forms of kinship complicated by intergenerational trauma and violence; ways to disrupt the nuclear family; the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on kinship and health care; and the queering of kinship by including more-than-human others. In these texts, kinship is reshaped through affective negotiations of attachment, loss, and support.

These exemplary texts foreground a range of unresolved issues that frame the concerns of this workshop. This workshop invites talks that engage with kinship in contemporary American literature through the lenses of queerness and affect, hence possible research questions to explore may include but are not limited to:

- How are kinship structures reworked through care, intimacy, and conflict across race, class, gender, Indigeneity, and disability?
- How is affective kinship represented distinctly in different forms of genre fiction in relation to fantastical, speculative, apocalyptic, dystopian, utopian dimensions?
- What formal, temporal, and spatial dimensions shape queer kinship in contemporary American literature?
- How does attention to emotions and affect complicate notions of queer kinship? How do the politics of emotional attachment and detachment come into play here?
- How do more-than-human relations and attention to the non-human environment expand the boundaries of kinship and expand affective resonance?

### **Confirmed speaker:**

Katharina Röder, TU Dortmund: "It is time to imagine." – Chosen Family as a Means of Survival in Contemporary Dystopian Worlds

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed argues that "the struggle for a bearable life is the struggle for queers to have space to breathe" (120). In her paper, Katharina Röder argues that queer characters, and especially queer characters of color, in contemporary dystopian fiction manage to create spaces "to breathe" through the formation of chosen families and nonbiological kinship bonds. These spaces allow them not only to survive in an environment in which they are villainized and persecuted, but to find small moments of what could potentially be described as happiness.

### **Works Cited:**

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