Personal Reflection: Defining the Traditional Family

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Abstract: Garcia focuses on the concept of the traditional family in the United States, through a semester long project spent crocheting a blanket. Choosing the fiber arts in respect to its historical connection to women and domestic arts Garcia reflects on the role of material culture and heirlooms within the family.

Keywords: material culture, traditional family, intersectional conflict analysis, art, arts approaches to conflict, Agnes Scott College

Figure 1: Crocheted blanket as family heirloom. Created by Sayen Garcia.
Creative Statement

For my final project, I focused on the concept of family in the United States. My analysis centers on a traditional definition of family, consisting of a husband, wife, and children. This definition is supplemented by an image of a specifically white family. This is evident in television shows and clothing catalogs displaying white families, and legislation dictating the limitation of those who stray away from this basic structure. For families of color, the existence of their families has been threatened by targeted legislation, like redlining, immigration restrictions, and state-sponsored violence at the hands of police and the military. For all families, their existence and dynamics are complicated by tight economic demands, skewed work-life balance, and limited social mobility. Central to life in the United States is its status as a meritocracy, and this influences the dynamics of family. However, the reality of economic mobility in the United States posits family as an important factor in success. Of course, there are many examples of people who hailed from poverty or non-traditional families who found success and wealth in the United States. The population of those who hold most of the wealth in the United States come from families with long standing success and influence. In contemporary conversation of family, we discuss nepotism and work to demystify the idea of equal opportunity, pointing to actors, politicians, tech moguls, and musicians who are only the latest of a long legacy of successful family. Additionally, the evolving roles allotted to women transform ideas of family. In the last century, it was abnormal for a woman to be unmarried and without children. Family life was expected to be the central focus of women. Traditional family dynamics position the woman as subservient to the husband, expected to run the household and care for children on their own. Legislation protected the commitment to marriage over the well-being of women, preventing divorce unless there were extenuating circumstances, leaving women subject to abuse and limited independence. As women entered the workplace, family roles shifted to account of this. Further, I consider how this definition restricts the existence of homosexual couples who were historically barred from marriage and presently restricted from adopting children through extensive interview processes or barred from IVF procedures due to their high cost. The definition of family is rapidly changing in the eyes of the public. This is not to say non-traditional families did not exist prior to the last couple of decades. Rather, the idea of family reflects cultural and circumstantial changes in society.

The Family Blanket

For my project, I focused on the material aspects of family. I spent the semester crocheting a blanket, initially intended to be a mixed-media mural. However, I found that the making of the blanket was sufficient in exploring these ideas. I decided to make the blanket without the use of a prescribed pattern and sourced my materials from craft stores and yarn offered to me by friends and family. It became a central part of my own community, making appearances while spending time with friends and on display to my family. When I initially showed the blanket to one of my friends, she was moved to tears, saying that it reminded her of a blanket she had owned as an infant. I chose fiber arts in respect to its historical importance as a domestic art, often relegated to women. Quilting, clothes making, crochet and knitting, and other forms of domestic craft are often disregarded as art due to their domestic use. However, these crafts demand a comparable
amount of artistry, direction, and creativity to painting, sculpting, or other art forms. I found that I made a lot of mistakes in making my blanket, mistakes that required me to problem solve and rely on my own knowledge to alter. However, these mistakes seemed to only be noticeable to me and contrasted with the praise I received from those I showed the blanket. I find that these mistakes give it character and demonstrate the personal process of making it.

In reflecting on the role of material culture within the family, I consider the privilege of heirlooms and other longstanding items held by families. Economic conditions often prevent the ability of accumulating items able to withstand time. The passing of items requires coordination and the proximity of family members. Immigration and displacement leave these items behind. Additionally, the evolving quality of materials constructed in contemporary times also affect the ability of heirlooms. While creating my blanket, I considered it’s future. Would my stitching hold up for years? What role will it play in my own home? Who will live in my home and use the blanket? Will it need mending, alterations, or In theorizing these questions, I realized that my thinking is ever-evolving. The conclusion of my project seemed to only start a new line of thinking and research. As the blanket is adopted into my own belongings, I look forward to its future as a site of research.

My thinking is founded on a reflection on my own family and my hesitance to define ourselves as an “American family,” even though by all accounts, we are an American family. My grandparents moved to the United States from Chile in the 1980’s during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. They were granted an opportunity to study at American universities and took the chance to embark on new lives. In the present, my family in the United States has grown with the birth of cousins but remains considerably small compared to the number who remain and continue to grow in Chile. When reflecting on this aspect of my own family, I realized that this is a common experience for the millions of people living as immigrants in the United States, and the absence of family is a defining factor of American families. Family transitions from a close support network who assist in childcare, celebration, and contribute to the creation community, to a source of conflict created through distance. Of course, the emergence of the internet and increased accessibility of air travel has eased the difficulty of this absence. However, it is not a replacement. This is significant in its alignment to traditional ideas of family in the U.S. where children are expected to leave their families and gain independence from a young age. In other countries, the culture surrounding family encourages children to remain near their families and hometowns, even when they reach adulthood. Immigration to the United States follows a similar pattern of American notions of independence and opportunity.

When looking closely at my immediate family, its basic construction also differs from the typical notion of family. In my home, my mother is head of household, and my sister and I are her dependents. It is a single parent household only consisting of women and has its own unique dynamic. Discussing with friends and peers about their own households, the differences of my own household became apparent. In my household, sharing our belongings is a given and boundaries are loosely defined. The absence of my father in the household is a similarly common experience of American families, yet in contrast with the traditional definition of family. My father’s absence is intertwined with the socio-political conflicts of the United States. Although I was born in the United States, the first of my family, and my mother grew up here, my parents met in Chile. I lived there for five years where my sister was born, before my mom decided to return to the United
States in search of opportunity. My parents wanted to ensure my sister and I had educational and life opportunities she felt were only going to be available to us in the United States. My father, who had lived in a small town in Chile his whole life, was now faced with the prospect of moving to the famed country distantly exposed to him through the export of media and living the consequences of the U.S.’s remote involvement in South American affairs. In an attempt to reunify the family, he applied for several visas over the course of my childhood, residential and visiting, each one rejected due to his non-traditional form of freelance employment, lack of education, or accusation that if he were to be granted a visiting visa, he would decide to stay past his allotted time and transform into a criminal in the eyes of the state. Our relationship has been maintained through Skype, WhatsApp, and semifrequent visits to Chile when we could afford to.