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"HAPPY TOGETHER?"*Envisioning the American Family in the Long 1950s*

ABSTRACT: As the nuclear, middle-class American family reached its apotheosis in what I call "the Long 1950s," an almost mythical period of post-war national prosperity, it became the bedrock of the Cold War consensus, charged with political and symbolic values that were often at odds with its realities. This paper first analyzes the forces at play in shaping the myth of family as "happy home corporation" in America, which included media pressure, changing social, demographic and economic conditions as well as regressive views of gender and sexual roles, especially as emerging from bestselling marriage and child-care manuals. It then looks at the way in which dissenting evidence from those Long 1950s, especially in the area of sexual behaviors as well as juvenile rebellion, showed the American family caught in a state of flux, which was at odds with the imperatives of the Cold War consensus.

KEYWORDS: 1950s, Cold War and Family, Marriage Manuals

Family and the American Century

There seems to be a general consensus among social historians that the institution of the middle-class American family of the twentieth century finds its origins in the Victorian family of the previous century when, following a transition from household production to wage work and professional occupations outside the home, women's roles were redefined in terms of domesticity rather than production, men were labelled "breadwinners" and children were said to need time to play, rather than contribute to the family economy (Tosh 1999, 1-8). In the early twentieth century, as immigration and urbanization appeared to weaken the traditional family by destroying kinship and community networks, reformers advocated the adoption of a "true American" family model – a restricted, exclusive nuclear unit in which women and children were divorced from the world of work: the middle-class Victorian family had become, by the start of the twentieth century, the "ideal" American family. As observers have pointed out, this model of the "happy together" husband and wife (and their children) in their separate,

yet complementary, roles has served in America a double purpose in cultural definitions of the nation: on the one hand, it has provided a blueprint that, in spite of its middle-class origin, has resonated through all classes and races in American society; on the other, far from being an unchallenged and unchanging constant in twentieth century American society, the nuclear family has ended up functioning as the yardstick against which every definition of “family” in America has been measured (Hansen-Garey 1998, 300).

As I will discuss in this article, a traditional vision of a nuclear, middle-class American family based on specific gender roles reached its apotheosis when, faced with the demands of the mobilization for the preservation of America’s core democratic values during the early phases of the Cold War, it rose as the ideological backbone of American society in what I call, with other scholars, the Long 1950s (see, among others, Booker 2002), an almost mythical period of American prosperity, extending from the end of WWII and into the first half of the 1960s, and coinciding with the economic boom of the post-WWII era. The Long 1950s were characterized by – among other things – a decisive expansion of the middle class, an emphasis on consumption and leisure, together with pervasive anti-Communist anxieties at home and abroad, and generalized fears of a nuclear build-up. It is within this context that the American family unit became the focus of a concerted propaganda effort in the Long 1950s to solidify, as I will argue, the politics of consensus necessary to promote the vision of the American Century which had been proclaimed in February 1941, ten months before the US entered WWII, by *Life* magazine publisher Henry Luce, who had called the nation to embrace “the opportunities of leadership in the world” and promote “a passionate devotion” to its founding values, those “great American ideals” which included “a love of freedom, a feeling for the equality of opportunity, a tradition of self-reliance and independence and also of co-operation” (Luce 1941, 170).

In a book entitled *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline*, Natasha Zaretsky has pointed out that, “more than any other institution” it is the “true” American family that crystallized Luce’s aspirations, an idealized model of the bi-generational white, middle-class family unit made up of a male breadwinner, a full time wife and homemaker, and children – the very unit that sociologist Talcott Parsons defined in 1955 as the “modern isolated nuclear family” (Zaretsky 2007, 5). Although many families in America at that time did not conform to this vision, nowhere was this family – Zaretsky has emphasized – more celebrated than in the pages of Luce’s own *Life* magazine, which, “week after week, with an estimated readership of twenty million people, circulated images of familial wholeness and fused ideas of middle-class consumption with Cold War imperatives” (Zaretsky 2007, 5). Those images included cheerful mothers, fathers, and children in their detached homes, fully equipped with family gardens, appliance-filled kitchens and the newly-purchased television set, around which the family was happily reunited every evening.

Together with *Life* magazine, government officials, political figures, media commentators and average Americans in the Long 1950s came to agree that successfully fighting the Cold War at home and abroad required fostering what McCall magazine, the leading women’s magazine of the period, had termed in 1954 “family togetherness,” an idea of family seen as retreat from, and defense against, impending conflicts. While experienced in the private sphere, the “together family” was defined in the public sphere, and the images it reflected had political significance. The inauguration of Disneyland in Anaheim, CA, in 1955 was predicated upon the strategic convergence of private and public images of the wholesome American family, and was therefore strategic in this context. Acclaimed as “the happiest place on earth,” Disneyland became part America’s creation myth, and part a place where, in Disney’s own words, “parents and children could have fun together” (Marling 1991, 175). It was, in other words, the perfect embodiment of the Cold War rhetoric of family unit as nation. Along with Disney, popular scholarship and magazine articles constantly reminded Americans about the founding values of the Cold War family. Particularly useful, in this area, turned out to be the developing medium of television, which made it its mission to seamlessly bridge the gap between the representation of the American family on screen and the American family itself, quickly becoming a “natural part of the domestic space” (Spigel 1992, 39). As Lynn Spigel (1992) has conclusively argued, sitcoms such as *The Honeymooners*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best*, *Leave it to Beaver*, and *I Love Lucy* presented American families that were an extension, or rather a mirror, of the real family unit watching from home.

Happy Suburban Corporation

Increasingly in the Long 1950s, the American home became a place away from the city, as returning veterans built families and fled *en masse* to the new, affordable housing developments that were springing up outside the major urban areas. Commonly defined as “suburbs,” these new developments promised to create ideal spaces for family interaction, fulfilling the long-standing modernist project of fusing proximity to urban jobs and rural retreat, city and country life all at the same time. Suburban family life came to be identified with an intensification of the gender roles predicated by the Victorian family of the previous century within a newly conceived sense of domesticity (May 2008, 6). Amid generalized Cold War fears of atomic annihilation and escalating racial tension in the inner cities, suburbia catered to the informal, family and child-centered lifestyles to which young parents aspired in the postwar period. Ridding couples of the day-to-day obligations posed by extended family and ethnic community, relocation to the suburbs allowed the new American family to direct its focus inward, while at the same time providing the illusion of engaging in an ever-broader rhetoric of postwar nationalism

based on achievement and consumption, which linked their social status as Cape Cod and Ranch House owners to a greater American good. Writing in 1956 about the recently inaugurated Chicago suburb of Park Forest, William Whyte noted that people were moving there because, besides the space, the amenities, and the ideal environment to raise a family, the suburb had become charged with the crucial symbolic value of delivering “a social atmosphere of striking vigor,” an asset its developers capitalized on when marketing the new suburbs not simply as “housing,” but rather as “happiness” (Whyte 1956, 314).

Predicated upon a return to domesticity based on integration of male and female family members and increased interactivity among them, the white flight to the suburbs was the catalyst for the redefinition of Americannes in the Long 1950s, centered around the social act of marriage and family raising, which became crucial in confirming that an individual’s private sphere was healthy and prosperous. The metaphor of marriage as marker of personal health was widespread. After the war, as genders came more and more to be defined as opposite of one another (women being described by pseudo-scientific pamphleteering as irrational, emotional, gentle, obedient, cheerful, and dependent; men, conversely, being described as rational, individualistic, unemotional, solid, and aggressive), marriage was more and more seen as the “balancing measure” for such diverging opposites (Miller-Nowak 1977, 153). In the Long 1950s, people were marrying in larger numbers than ever before and were marrying at an unusually young age. In 1955, the median age of marriage had dropped, compared to 1890, from 22 to 20 for women and from 26 to 23 for men. In the same period, it was estimated that 96.5 percent of women and 94.1 percent of men in the US were or had been married (Coleman-Ganong 2014, 877) and marriage came to be regarded as a “natural state in adults” (Landis 1955, 11).

In the public rhetoric of the nuclear family fostered by books and media, the woman-homemaker was endowed with the central responsibility of expanding the family with a large number of offspring. The Christmas 1956 issue of *Life* magazine indicated that “of all the accomplishments of the American woman, the one she brings off with most spectacular success is having babies.” Although few families achieved the Fordist “minimum production goal” of six children suggested in the article, the average American woman in the late 1950s had 3.7 children over the course of her life (Marty 1997, 84).

In the Long 1950s, the family was ideally viewed – to borrow the phrase from a 1958 bestseller on adolescence, *Twixt Twelve and Twenty*, written by popular rocker-turned-sociologist Pat Boone – as a “happy home corporation,” an efficient production unit operating in line with its Cold War-assigned task of nurturing national health. Accordingly, social roles were reformulated based on a corporate vision where tasks and responsibilities were efficiently distributed between the husband, in Boone’s metaphor “the leader-president” in charge of the family decision-making process – the one who

“can say ‘it’s going to be this way’” – and the wife, the “executive vice-president,” in charge of the “production units,” aka the home and the kids (Boone 1958, 83-4). Viewed optimistically, the metaphor of home as “happy corporation” aspired to a vision of the middle-class family in which sex roles were at last beginning to converge into some sort of pseudo-democratic sharing of domestic tasks and responsibilities.

Nowhere was this newly conceived “corporate home” more visible than in the area of women’s work, where images promoted by books and media and reality were often at odds. If, on the one hand, the middle-class American family kept expanding rapidly (65 percent of American families were accounted as middle-class by 1960, more than twice the percentage as in 1929), on the other the myth of the “family wage,” where a breadwinner husband earned enough to support an entire family, increasingly failed to match reality, leading to a higher percentage of married mothers working outside the home. Between 1948 and 1958 the number of employed women with children under eighteen rose from 4.1 million in 1948 to 7.5 million a decade later, an increase of 80 percent (Coleman 2014, 877). “The working mother, even the one who has young children, is here to stay,” declared a speaker at the 1955 National Conference of Social Work (Bremner-Reichard 1982, 6).

As, contrary to general perception, women entered the workforce in ever growing numbers in the 1950s, a more fluid distribution of gender roles in the family emerged, as feminist historians have suggested, whereby postwar women “both negotiated with and rationalized the oppressive aspects of the family ideal” (Spigel 1992, 42). Nevertheless, Cold War consensus promoted an ideal of the subordinate, stay-at-home mother, and typically depicted working women as negligent mothers and a menace to their husbands’ careers and to family stability. Books such as Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg’s *Modern Women: The Lost Sex* (1947) convincingly spread the notion according to which working women would provoke a disgraceful confusion of gender roles, by which males would become feminized and children would grow up in such confusion that they would end up being homosexual. The very popular *Common-Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* by Dr. Benjamin Spock (published in 1946 and selling 16 million copies over 20 years) drew its most unique points not so much from the idea that parents should have a permissive attitude with children, as is commonly believed, but rather from the fact that mothers should devote themselves to full-time child-rearing. In line with the “home as corporate space” rhetoric, media, schools, and therapists disseminated the notion that happiness was dictated by an individual’s “proper functioning,” with movies and popular psychology relentlessly emphasizing “the dreadful things that happened when women became more interested in careers than marriage or men resisted domestic conformity” (Coontz 2008, 38). One such example is the 1955 Nicholas Ray film classic *Rebel Without a Cause*, where the blame for the dysfunctional family unit is ultimately placed on the feminized father, suitably

represented as wearing a kitchen apron in a crucial confrontation scene with his rebel son, played by James Dean. Promoted by books, magazines and television shows, the mock-Victorian vision of life of Mom the homemaker and Dad the breadwinner was transformed into a prescriptive set of rules to which relations between sexes should conform – a predetermined social vision which most Americans chose to follow without questioning its core assumptions, and which relied on a sexual bias “in which women and men had characteristics so different as to appear almost members of separate species” (Miller-Nowak 1977, 152).

Containing Sexuality

That vision naturally extended to the realm of sexuality, where masculinity and femininity were contained within very specific and narrow gender roles, which assumed, among others, the moral purity of “womanhood” as well as a set of social expectations for women that Betty Friedan famously defined, in her 1963 shock hit, as the “feminine mystique.” And as Dr. Benjamin Spock, in his chart-busting *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946), encouraged women to “focus on motherhood” at a time when women were expected to give up the larger sexual and economic freedoms they had experienced in wartime (when many women had acquired financial independence in the jobs they had filled replacing the men who had gone off to war), men and women were persuaded in the post-war years to follow rules and control emotions. Those very emotions, first and foremost sexual drives, that Spock’s book “simply ignored” (Melody-Peterson 1999, 117).

In the Long 1950s lovemaking was conceived as heterosexual, between married people, and strictly man-centered. In a 1957 article entitled “What Every Husband Needs,” the *Reader’s Digest* claimed that men needed, “simply good sex, uncomplicated by the worry of satisfying the woman” (Lees 1957, 139). A woman’s sexual satisfaction was regarded as sheer frivolity, because she was expected, according to the article, to make “love a substitute for desire” (Miller-Nowak 1977, 158), in other words to sublimate sexual desire into desire for motherhood. *Modern Woman* magazine claimed that, in order to be fully satisfactory for a woman, the sexual act had to depend on the “desire to be a mother.” And whenever female sexuality became the subject of media discussion, it was mostly within the context of questioning the quality of female pleasure, with lengthy debates on the difference between acceptable orgasm (i.e. vaginal orgasm, it being the only type directly linked with procreation) vs. unacceptable orgasm (i.e. clitoral orgasm, which raging popular Freudianism saw as a sign of arrested womanly development).

One of the best-selling books of the decade – a time when popular literature at large refrained from frank discussion of sexual matters – was Hannah and Abraham Stone's *A Marriage Manual: A Practical Guidebook to Sex and Marriage*, which summarized prevailing attitudes to sexual propriety during the decade. First published in 1935 but completely revised for its 1952 edition, the book discussed sexuality as strictly functional to procreation and rigorously bound to marriage. Because the Stones believed that "the sexual impulse of the woman may normally remain dormant for a long period" (Stone and Stone 1952, 206), they viewed female sexuality as divorced from orgasm, assuring readers that conception and sexual pleasure are by no means related. This view brought the understanding of female sexuality in America back by half a century. As scholars have shown (Gordon 1978 and D'Emilio-Freedman 1988), beginning with the early twentieth century, two new trends in understanding "intimate matters" had begun to surface: on the one hand, a growing acceptance of non-procreative marital sex; and on the other an emerging awareness of female sexual desire and its right to be satisfied. In *Sane Sex Life and Sane Sex Living*, a manual published in 1919, H. W. Long had written that the "perfect accomplishment [of sex] is an art to be cultivated" (quoted in Gordon 1978, 68). And A. Herbert Gray, in his 1922 manual *Men, Women, and God*, had argued that "in every woman who truly loves there lies dormant the capacity to become vibrantly alive in response to her lover, and to meet him as a willing and active participant in the sacrament of marriage" (quoted in Gordon 1978, 72). Compared to early twentieth century discourses of American sexuality, the views promoted by the Stones marked a regression to nineteenth century views of sexuality as rigidly rooted in marriage and procreation and of female sexuality as invariably posited in the absence or suspension of sexual feeling.

A related view of sexuality appeared in another popular family planning manual of the Long 1950s, Eustace Chesser's *Love Without Fear: How to Achieve Sex Happiness in Marriage*. Originally published in Britain in 1940 (and acquitted of obscenity charges in 1942), the book appeared in the U.S. in 1947, selling just under a million copies in its first hardcover. The paperback edition did even better. Although it allowed for the view that pre-marital sex might in fact be beneficial to produce a "mature marriage," Chesser was aligned with the Stones in his suspicion of feminine sexuality, which he saw as a conduit to sexual promiscuity for women and defined as "wholly opposed to woman's true feminine nature" (Chesser 1947, 44). Likewise, Chesser thought poorly of women who were too forward during sex, since "man expects to take the lead in intercourse and may be turned off by attempts to stimulate him that are too direct" and cautioned his readers that a thin line existed between the normal and the perverse: "any woman could make a pervert of any normal man within six months" (143), wrote Chesser, without ever mentioning, however, that the opposite might as well be possible. Chesser worried that, if unleashed under the wrong circumstances, female sexuality might be hard to control.

Hence, he stressed – like the Stones – the need for its decisive containment within the boundaries of healthy marriage and procreation.

As Elaine Tyler May has shown, during the postwar years, sexual values and sexual behaviors were in flux. Noncoital forms of premarital sex were gaining widespread acceptance, and couples eagerly looked toward marriage for erotic fulfillment. On the other hand, however, “the taboos against premarital intercourse, homosexuality, and other forms of nonprocreative sex remained central tenets of sexual morality (May 1988, 116). Sexual containment became part of the larger strategy of Cold War containment. Although mitigated in the 1930s, the Comstock laws of 1873 (officially known as “An Act for the suppression of trade in, and circulation of Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use”), banning information and distribution through the mail of contraception (and in some states even banning contraception), remained in effect throughout the Long 1950s, only to be struck down – but exclusively for married couples – in 1965. Along the same lines, out-of-wedlock sexuality, and especially adultery, was illegal in most U.S. states and explicitly targeted by the Hollywood Production Code (also known as the Hays Code), according to which the rendition of marital life in movies should be kept within the Christian doctrine of marriage as rooted in the idea that “the family that prays together stays together.” These narrow boundaries had been forcefully advocated by pressure groups such as the Legion of Decency, whose activism had been mostly responsible for the establishment of the Code itself in the 1930s. The Hays Code explicitly stipulated that adultery, while sometimes necessary plot material, “must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively” (Pennington 2007, 153).

The Hays Code also banned any sympathetic treatment of homosexuality, another highly contested area of non-normative behavior in the Long 1950s. In line with social attitudes as well as the letter of law in the U.S. (which, prior to 1962, regarded sodomy as a felony in every state), gays were socially stigmatized as sick individuals, both physically and mentally (Eaklor 2008, 77-103). In the Long 1950s, homosexuality came to be construed as the form of sexual rebellion that most directly was constructed as an infringement of domestic security. Unlike heterosexual love, which was rarely the topic of public conversation, homosexuality turned out to be the perfect site to turn private stigma into a matter of national concern. Scholars have shown that American media were instrumental in bringing homosexuality under public scrutiny beginning in 1950, as Senator Joseph McCarthy’s crusade against communist spies within the U.S. intersected with a homophobia campaign aimed at alleged Communist sympathizers working for the State Department. Dubbed as the “Perverts on the Potomac” campaign, it aimed at demonizing homosexuals not only as sexual deviants, but also as a threat to the nation. Described as emotionally unstable and immoral, homosexuals were deemed “very susceptible to Communism,” and therefore targeted, alongside with Communists, in the

same category of national threats against which McCarthyism waged its infamous campaign (Streitmatter 2009, 6-16).

Resisting Containment

The McCarthy campaigns targeting homosexuals were proof that sexuality in America was more difficult to subsume under the Cold War consensus umbrella than many would have liked. The publication of two revealing and highly controversial studies, and the proliferation of sexual images in the media provide ample evidence that sexual promiscuity was becoming widespread in society. Published at the turn of the 1950s, Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), better known as the "Kinsey Reports," boldly disputed some hardcore tenets of American sexuality in the Long 1950s. The Reports showcased a nation whose attitudes ran against the grain of the Cold War's sexual orthodoxy. In particular, Kinsey contested notions that women were generally not sexual, in presenting evidence that American sexuality was largely an affair exceeding the sacred boundaries of marriage. Even more controversially, Kinsey addressed head-on the master taboos of the Cold War consensus: adolescent and pre-adolescent sexuality, and homosexuality. In his first book, Kinsey found that 45% of male subjects reacted sexually to persons of both genders during their adult lives, and that erotic responses to sadomasochistic stories were recorded in 22% of men and 12% of women participating in the study. Based on interviews with educators, parents as well as convicted child molesters, Kinsey also provided detailed evidence of hundreds of cases of sexual abuse of children by adults. In other words, Kinsey exposed an America swarming with subversion to what had been regarded up to that point as the nation's unwavering tenets of sexual propriety. Cold War orthodoxy exploited Kinsey's findings as evidence of an attack on America's founding moral and political values (Melody-Peterson 1999, 122).

What made Kinsey's research particularly disturbing, and hard to challenge and ignore, was that it was based on the hitherto largest sample of interviews ever used in studies of human sexuality: over 5,000 men and over 5,000 women were interviewed for the two studies, according to a systematic method that included up to 521 data points per interviewee, yielding what came to be known as "the most influential [text] on human sexuality in the twentieth century" (Drucker 2014, 11). Likewise, in the Long 1950s it was hard to ignore the fact that sexuality – although publicly regarded as an almost taboo topic – sprang up everywhere. In *Intimate Matters*, D'Emilio and Freedman point out the emergence of conflicting narratives of sexuality in early Cold War America and document an unprecedented frankness about sexual matters in the period. D'Emilio and Freedman show that, after World War II, pornography and other media products aimed at the sexual entertainment of men through the objectification of women's bodies

emerged from underground circulation. If the Long 1950s is the era of idealized fantasies of heterosexual nuclear families focused on procreation for the higher good of the nation, it was also the era in which *Playboy* magazine, launched in 1953, and a host of imitators saturated the nation's newsstands. Pseudo-physical fitness magazines, replete with images of athletic male figures, filled the niche for the male homosexual market, while scandal magazines such as *Confidential* and *Keyhole* catered to a female audience. By the late 1940s, on the new awareness that "sex sells," publishers of paperback books were redesigning their covers to make their products more appealing. In 1948, Popular Library issued the first "nipple cover" promoting *The Private Life of Helen of Troy*. Playing cards, slides, photos, homemade movies and even phonograph records of pornographic content invaded the market.

Each in their own different ways, the appeal of the most celebrated public icons of the Long 1950s – Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, James Dean and Marlon Brando – was defined through their subversive, or pseudo-subversive, sexual stance. While there appears to be a generalized agreement in the scholarship in viewing Marilyn's icon as to conform and reinforce the decade's agreement over male-centered sexuality, Elvis, Dean and Brando promoted sexualized images of themselves that were more problematic to the Cold War consensus. Behind her apparent subversiveness, Marilyn's appeal lay in the way she made sex, hitherto seedy or menacing, seem innocent and sweet (Churchwell 2005, 19). As the phrase "child-star," a constant throughout writing about Marilyn Monroe, makes clear, the Marilyn phenomenon neutralized fears of that very sexual subversion which it subsumed in the Long 1950s.

Contrary to Marilyn, Elvis, Dean and Brando's sexualities all symbolized the antagonistic emergence of rebellious youth post-WWII. In a book entitled *Rebels*, Leerom Medovoi has shown how the new social formation of teenage/youth emerged in a cultural space that was distinct from the narrowly-defined social and sexual roles of the pre-war era. In displaying their body as sexualized and sexually rebellious objects, Brando, Dean and Elvis all converged in defying normative gender distinctions predicated in the heterosexual, domesticated, identitarian confines of 1950s young males. Their sexual appeal did not conform to more conventional images as embodied by other male stars of the era. Elvis' ostentatious sexual persona, Brando's social transgressions, and Deans' rejection of normative identity in his rebellion "without a cause" turned them, each in their own way, into "outlaws," each resisting the control of domesticating social forces.¹ It was through the agency of sexually rebellious stars such as Brando, Dean and Elvis, that youth audiences began to question received notions of

¹ Likewise, Dean's fluid sexual identity, which would later make him a central figure in the Gay Rights movement's political struggle over sexual identity in the 1970s, placed him outside socially prescribed norms of masculine sexuality.

"identity," viewing themselves as emergent personalities entitled to rebel against middle-class conformity. American teenagers during the Long 1950s became subversives – self-defined or "rebels" who eschewed norms of Cold War containment within the family. The rise of rock 'n' roll (and of Elvis in particular), James Dean's rebellion "without a cause" as the synthesis of the wider social problem known as "juvenile delinquency," as well as the "bad girls" and "tomboys" depicted in popular movies and novels of the period, are all discussed by Medovoi as evidence of a decade in which Cold War confrontation propelled American society to accept, even encourage, teenage rebellion as a marker of its inherent democratic advantage (Medovoi 2005, 167-214).

Highbrow and middlebrow literature in America's Long 1950s swarmed with representations of unwholesome families and the sexual subversion which was normally represented as the precondition of family crisis. From Holden Caulfield to *Howl*, from *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* to *Peyton Place*, from *Lolita* to *Rabbit, Run* and beyond, American literature of the Long 1950s seemed to focus extensively on the breakdown of the sacred institution of family. American literature appeared unwilling to buy into the prevalent upbeat mood that equaled the retreat to domesticity with the fulfillment of America's national mission. Rather, these books viewed the family as the center of a mid-century spiritual crisis, at a juncture that Norman Mailer dubbed as "one of the worst decades in the history of man" (Castronovo 2004, 13), the site where Americans created permanent images of their struggle to make sense of their culture and themselves.

Conclusion

These images provoked telluric shifts in the Cold War consensus of family as the privileged site of national values and showed it in a state of flux in which ideology and reality were at odds. Idealized by Cold War rhetoric, the institution of American family in the Long 1950s was repositioning itself in view of the ultimate assaults that the next two decades would bring.

In *Homeward Bound*, May reports that in the summer of 1959 two newlyweds in Miami slipped into a cozy, 12-foot deep, 6-by-14-foot wide fallout shelter, where they spent a 14-day honeymoon of unbroken togetherness. Although no more than a publicity stunt to promote a local company, the sheltered honeymoon, which earned the couple a successive "real" honeymoon in Mexico and was featured in *Life* magazine, highlighted that the Cold War effort would protect and preserve families, not scatter and dissolve them. The familial ideology that took shape in the Long 1950s had turned the American family into a bulwark of containment to propel the advancement of the American Century. The Civil Defense effort, therefore, of which the fallout shelter was the ultimate symbol, needed to confirm that it was capable of successfully preserving it. Seen in

retrospect, however, the message appears ambivalent, a testament to the fragility of the American family which – in order to remain “happy together” – needed heavy protection against the intrusion of forces outside itself.

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