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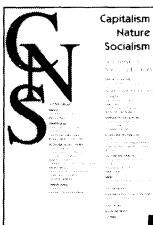
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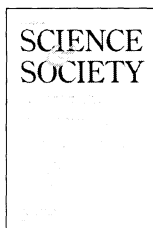
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Thea Farhadian

Families Inc.

Some Reflections on the American Family in the '80s and '90s— Universals, Hegemony, and Drag

The problems our nation faces are not all fiscal in nature. The American people are increasingly concerned about the coarsening of the culture, the breakup of the family, and a decline of civility.

—William J. Bennett¹

Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original.*

—Judith Butler²

At this moment in history, the cultural conversations regarding the "family" in America are rhetorically extreme, factually distorted, and virulent. Hysteria from the media continually reminds me that the culture wars between the conservative "pro-family" movement and radical leftist "pro (choice) family" movements are far from over. "Family"—whether it be traditional or alternative,³ gay, straight or other—has become a commodified item for mass consumption, a media spectacle of the 1980s and 1990s. "Family" (defined as a two-parent, straight, white, middle-class unit) is viewed by ultra-conservatives as being under siege as a pillar in the dominant ideology

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of American culture. As the US government document *The Family: Preserving America's Future* argues, the state of society corresponds to the state and preservation of the nuclear family.

The breakdown of the American family in recent years merely confirms the interdependence of strong families and secure liberties. Irresponsibility, self-seeking, and contempt of authority erode not only the family but respect for law and civility as well. *"Children who do not learn to live out commitments to others in a family do not learn to live within a larger society either. If we wish to see a renewal of liberty, we must work for a renaissance of the family."*⁴

This "renaissance of the family" implies a cultural improvement in the ability of individuals to live successfully in the larger society. In this way, the "renaissance of family" or "family" contains the promise of a

It is this fear of being undone—an inner knowledge of its (the nuclear family's) own contingency—that propels the 1990s "pro-family" movement forward.

cure for societal and personal ills.⁵ For the conservative "pro-family" movement, the preservation of family values promises to be the curative agent, the "fabric" of social order; yet, it is under siege, failing or in fear of failing. And yet, paradoxically, "family" is a place of pain and disappointment for many, if not most, Americans. So we must ask what we mean by "family." How was it constructed? How did it achieve its glorified status?

How does this conservative conceptualization of "family" contribute to the intellectual and social acts of "othering"? And more interestingly, what precisely motivates the kind of fervor we see in the "family values" movement?

In positioning the art work *Families Inc.* in a theoretical context, it made sense to look at the interplay of five main issues in the discourse of the family: (1) universals and family history, (2) the development of the white nuclear family as a glorified system (in juxtaposition/relation to the disregard shown other family structures), (3) the ethnographic gaze as providing the framework for the "us/them" dichotomy, (4) the white nuclear family as a system under siege from internal and external threats, and (5) the relationship of Judith Butler's notion of "gender repetition" to the fervor in the conservative "pro-family" movement. While it is not possible or within the scope of this short paper to address

each topic in depth or thoroughly, it is my intention to look at these issues in a more general way, noting their level of interplay and how they have informed and provided a framework for my visual work.

Universals and the History of Family

Many proponents of "traditional family values" presume that the nuclear family structure has been universal across time and cultures; the task of the "pro-family" movement is to return Americans to this "original" system. The work of scholars on the family—in particular, Stephanie Coontz, Linda Nicholson, and Eli Zaretsky—deconstruct this assumption of universality and discuss the diversity in familial structures as well as their relationship to the economic structures of a given time.

The nuclear family among the bourgeoisie, as Zaretsky notes, can be traced to the eighteenth century. Prior to the eighteenth century, extended kinship was the predominant family system, and the basic economic unit was the manor or village economy. During this time, the concept of the nuclear family began to develop. Simultaneously, the existing aristocratic society opposed and blocked the development of this new kind of family. This new self-reliant family, what we refer now to as the "traditional" family, developed with the rise of early capitalism and became a kind of "moral centerpiece,"⁶ creating a framework for separate spheres for men and women.⁷

Stephanie Coontz analyzes families in Europe and the United States, describing changes from extended families to kinship systems to the private nuclear family. Coontz points out, for instance, that during the depression many Americans lived with relatives, friends or strangers in houses or apartments. Economic hardships made it more advantageous for people to live in crowded situations with an increased interdependence and closer, extended-family networks. This family network included relatives and friends, as well as the broader community. Immigrant communities, in particular, had large kinship networks, often as a means of survival in an industrial society (and, of course, many came from societies already organized around kin).⁸ As the post-World War II economy grew, the US (white) middle class developed, not only as the more predominant class but also as a kind of social myth, eventually emerging in the 1950s as an ideal system.

It is pertinent to note that the conservative notion of the traditional family (and the traditional/alternative dichotomy) is problematic in that it attributes a false universality to a family type that is a fairly recent creation and in historical flux.⁹ As Nicholson points out:

While there is a good deal of debate within the field of family history about how far back the nuclear family extends and about what type of family form immediately preceded it, no one credits any family form as universal. Too much anthropological literature exists which documents the variability of kinship systems, living arrangements, and the ways in which these combine across cultures.¹⁰

That conservatives still cling to the idea of a traditional family with such fervor reminds me that this debate is not about universality or biological naturalness but about legitimacy and the privileging of some family types over others.

African Americans and Blame

While the majority of post-World War II Americans had it very good economically, about 15 to 20 percent of Americans had it quite bad. This era saw the emergence of the first African American ghettos. Many European immigrants made their way into urban life, thus increasing their opportunities, but it was “not the case for families of many African Americans, whose emigration to Northern cities occurred primarily later in the century.”¹¹ This factor, coupled with racial discrimination, led to rising unemployment among African Americans. The rise in the number of households headed by single mothers and the increase in remarriage, coupled with the rise in unemployment among African American men, contributed to the development of a black underclass. Yet, the growing trend in the 1980s was to blame the poor (especially African American people) for their state of poverty while undermining the relationship of economics to family life. The Reagan-appointed White House Group Working on the Family skewed the questions into the following form: “How do we deal with those instances of poverty, of which there are more and more, that result from personal choices? As one critic has put it, ‘Nobody forces people to abandon spouse, to separate, to divorce, or to have children outside of wedlock. The government doesn’t. There’s no law saying you have to do that.’”¹²

Defining poverty as a personal choice implies that the people choosing poverty do so knowingly and willingly. It also suggests that poor families possess something intrinsic in their nature that causes them to make choices that lead to poverty. According to Coontz, the argument became increasingly stark in the 1980s. She points out that the “new consensus” about black families and poverty is hardly original. In almost every decade, for 200 years, someone has “discovered” that the black family is falling apart.¹³

Yet, researchers in the 1950s and 1960s demonstrated that African American communities were effective in pulling together resources and building high levels of solidarity in the midst of economic, political, and racial changes. Many post-war, poor, African American families had a broader, more extended family with closer connection to relatives, borders, and the larger community. Many of these kinship systems helped members meet economic needs through the exchange of money, clothes, furniture, the care of children, etc. The strengths of the African American family and community—role flexibility; extended-kin networks; bicultural experiences, languages and values; and racial solidarities—have been mostly unrecognized by the larger white milieu. Instead, these communities are largely criticized for failing to conform to an idealized white model.

And what is more interesting is that the mainstream media culture in the United States represents the poor as predominantly negative while perpetuating the stereotype that all African Americans are poor; thus race bias masquerades as economic fact. On the subject of African Americans and the underclass, bell hooks writes: “[Blackness] is commodified in such a way that fictive accounts of underclass black life in whatever setting may be more lauded, more marketable, than other visions because mainstream conservative white audiences desire these images.”¹⁴

It is the maintenance of such images that enables the rhetoric of whiteness-as-superior, whiteness-as-goodness, to permeate mainstream thinking. hooks goes on to say:

As rapper Dr. Dre calls it, “People in the suburbs, they can’t go to the ghetto so they like to hear about what’s goin’ on. Everybody wants to be down.” The desire to be “down” has promoted a conservative appropriation of specific aspects of underclass black life, whose reality is dehumanized via a process of commodification wherein no corre-

lation is made between mainstream hedonistic consumerism and the reproduction of a social system that perpetuates and maintains an underclass.¹⁵

As this underclass developed (after the war) as a real phenomenon, it simultaneously developed as an ideological one via the marketable images sold by the media. This racist perspective, coupled with the growing homogeneity of the white middle class, made way for the new belief in the universality and superiority of the white nuclear family.

Norms and the Gaze: Visibility and Invisibility

The stigmatization of black families by the dominant culture provided a foundation for the new definition of family—the white nuclear family as ideal, as pure. In this definition, “family” becomes a retreat from outside threats. In this contrived safety zone, the “family” separates itself from the rest of the world, positioning itself in the place of the observer, claiming to possess the “tools” to study others. Here, it is invisible and invulnerable. As such, it is similar in status to the (largely unspoken) traditional ethnographic gaze. On the subject of “the gaze” and anthropology, Trinh T. Minh-Ha states:

One of the traps that anthropology has fallen into is to claim objectivity via the “other.” Or, in other words, to think that object can be separated from subject. The idea that there is a hidden truth in the other’s culture that needs the joint effort of the outsider and the insider to be fully unveiled is highly misleading. On one hand, it allows the anthropologist to justify his role—the outsider sees more objectively while the insider understands more subjectively.¹⁶

Trinh goes on to discuss the benefits that this dichotomization provides for the anthropologist. “[It] favors the development of what Zora Neale Hurston called ‘the pet system’: the outsider ‘tames’ a native whose participation would give weight to his words, if not turn them into facts.”¹⁷

The traditional assumption that anthropology can be separated from its subject provides a framework for divisions such as insider/outsider, us/them, pure/impure, normal/pathological. The “civilized” people (too transparent to study), study the less-civilized (and visible) people.

The “we” (white, middle class America) has the psychology, the tools to study/gaze and “they” have the culture to be studied.¹⁸

As possessors of the tools to study, the “we” or dominant white culture holds the assumption, however conscious or unconscious, that the “other” lacks the ability to comprehend the working of the powerful. In this way, white culture assumes it can control the gaze of the “other.”¹⁹ In describing the discussions on race in her university classes, bell hooks notes that many white students respond with disbelief, shock, and rage when they hear African American students talk critically about whiteness. While many of these students consider themselves antiracist, they, on some level, imagine that they are invisible to African Americans. “In white supremacist society,” hooks states, “white people can ‘safely’ imagine that they are invisible to black people since the power they have historically asserted, and even now collectively assert over black people, accorded them the right to control the black gaze.”²⁰

Controlling the gaze presumes that white (racist) people are not seen by African Americans. In a similar way, African Americans/“others” are not seen by white racists and hence silenced. On the subject of silence and the gaze, Trinh states:

A conversation of “us” with “us” about “them” is a conversation in which “them” is silenced. “Them” always stands on the other side of the hill, naked and speechless, barely present in its absence. Subject of discussion, “them” is only admitted among “us,” the discussing subjects, when accompanied or introduced by an “us” member, hence the dependency of “them” and its need to acquire good manners for the membership standing.²¹

Here, the notion of “us” depends on the notion of “them.” Dominant culture maintains its “us” position via silence—by silencing the other, and via language/information—as decided upon by an “us” member. In this way the gaze of the “other” is seemingly controlled as well. In this model of the (ethnographic) gaze, “whiteness” is an unmarked category and the prevailing arbiter of categories of “other.” As invisible, unmarked, and unspoken, it—whiteness—maintains the power intrinsic to hegemony.²²

This is similar to the 1990s notion of family as seen by the dominant culture and the religious Right. This conception of the family as possessing

the tools to study and gaze at the “they” from a safe position of retreat, sees itself as the norm and everything outside or different as out-cast/deviant. The ideal of family is considered by many conservatives to be not only an appropriate standard by which to measure “others” but, as Roddey Reid states, a benchmark for the divisions of “normal, pathological, self, other.” It is the preservation of such categories (both spoken and unspoken) that motivate this 1990s definition of family and more importantly, the definition of norms.

Even though this norm is invisible and invulnerable, it claims to be visible and vulnerable. We see this manifested in the rhetoric of the American family under siege, under threat of colonization (by social others). Reid states: “You might say that in this way the so-called modern domestic family has never seemed to fully work either; it has been always already in crisis, internally weak, and open to ‘invasion’ by outside forces.”²³

And in discussing the “new” family that was emerging in the nineteenth century, he states:

However because of these abject groups, it was understood that the new family life was a very fragile thing. Middle-class private life was rarely experienced as secure but under constant threat from without: the street could lure husband or adolescent away with promises of pleasure and ambition, crowds could well up in revolutionary fervor and swallow alive whole families and social classes....²⁴

Reid also points out that enemies are not just outside the family but also “within” (e.g., child killers, sexual molesters, etc.). Feminists, gays, lesbians, and transgendered people also pose a threat to the nuclear family—inside (and outside) the family. “Focus on the Family,” a “pro-family” organization from the religious Right states:

Many categorical grants and contracts are made on behalf of groups with what I would consider to be anti-family positions, such as Planned Parenthood, Gay Partner, NOW’s Legal Defense Fund, and others favoring abortion, forced bus-ing, homosexual advocacy, etc. In 1981, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded \$5,000 to the Gay Sunshine Press to publish the Gay Sunshine Journal. In the 1980s, the Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration gave \$167,000 to the Project to Promote Civil Liberties, related to quotas for

*lesbians and homosexuals. The Heresies Collection received \$3,500 to support Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics (italics in original).*²⁵

Here, the enemies, or anti-family organizations are all those outside the conservative ideology of the nuclear family—leftists, feminists, gays, and lesbians. As such, the nuclear family system is only considered to be safeguarded when men and women remain in their traditional roles. The recent “Promise Keepers” rally (estimated attendance of 500,000) in Washington, D.C., was grounded in the belief that men have to take back their “traditional” roles, as evidenced in the statement by Tony Evans, a senior pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas.

Sit down with your wife and say something like this: “Honey, I’ve made a terrible mistake. I’ve given you my role. I gave up leading this family, and I forced you to take my place. Now, I must reclaim that role.”...I’m not suggesting you *ask* for your role back, I’m urging you *take* it back...there can be no compromise here. If you’re going to lead, you must lead.²⁶

The ardent concern about sex roles being undone is expressed as the explicit/spoken concern, though the implicit concern is the supposed diminution of power for men when women are freed from the constraints of household and emotional duties.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender relationships go a step further by challenging exclusive dichotomous concepts of gender, the very basis for the nuclear family. The “pro-family” proponents hold the assumption that if homosexual activity is protected, the foundations of the family—that is, heterosexual monogamous marriage—will be shaken.²⁷ And yet, many gays would like to be connected more closely with their families of origin, but they are met with hostility. The religious Right has linked homosexuality and feminism to “family breakdown”; though it would be more fair to say that gays and lesbians are not anti-family, but rather excluded from and stigmatized by families that cannot transcend such dichotomous definitions in order to maintain emotional loyalties.

Another level of threat from within the family, according to proponents of the False Memory Syndrome, is the grown adult who makes accusations of previous abuse within the family. According to these proponents, accusations of sexual abuse are insidious, emotionally

charged, and highly sensationalized. Organizations such as the False Memory Syndrome Foundation have developed to respond to the concern about false memories and their consequences on families. As such, the False Memory movement has become a kind of pro-family movement of the 1980s and 1990s. The pamphlet of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation reads,

Increasingly throughout the country, grown children undergoing therapeutic programs have come to believe that they suffer from “repressed memories” of incest and sexual abuse. While some reports of incest and sexual abuse are surely true, these decade-delayed memories are too often the result of False Memory Syndrome caused by a disastrous “therapeutic” program. FMS has a devastating effect on the victim and typically produces a continuing dependency on the very program that creates the syndrome. FMS proceeds to destroy the psychological well-being not only of the primary victim but—through false accusations of incest and sexual abuse—other members of the primary victim’s family.²⁸

Thyrza Goodeve addresses the political issues behind the False Memory debate:

In this context “false memory syndrome” and the False Memory Syndrome Foundation raise strategic questions not about the “fact” of false memory (a “fact” which is as much a part of late-twentieth-century therapeutic and epistemological life, as much as it is a phenomenon to be wary and suspicious of) but about the deployment of false memory as a syndrome attacking the institution of the family.²⁹

I agree with Goodeve: there are both true and false memories, but the real issue is not about memory but about family “purity” being under siege. The crisis is not about the family but about an idealized notion of the family. Reid states that the notion of family as ideal keeps the norm from being realized. In this way, “family” is more like a Platonic ideal “in our heads” that is never fully actualized in everyday life.

Repetition, Drag, and Hegemony

Paradoxically, pro-family advocates argue that the patriarchal gendered family is “natural” and “vulnerable,” yet they also claim that it needs to

be privileged to survive.³⁰ It would seem, *prima facie*, that if the white nuclear family were natural and universal, it would simply “be”—be more continuous throughout history, certainly less under threat, or perhaps not under threat at all. And yet the threat, I believe, is less about the family and more about the unknown—about the critique of hegemony as a framework for norms, the flux of gender, and the fear of diversity.³¹ Family values, as a system of purity, as an ideology, articulates its incessant need to shield itself from the apprehension of being “undone.” This is the fervor we see in the religious Right via the media’s ever-present images of the white nuclear family.

It is this fear of being undone—an inner knowledge of its (the nuclear family’s) own contingency—that propels the 1990s “profamily” movement forward. In this way, the 1990s religious Right version of family shares a seat with Judith Butler’s “heterosexuality as origin.” Butler criticizes the assumption that heterosexuality is set up as origin and homosexuality as a poor copy. In order to convince itself of its importance, heterosexuality must repeat itself via drag in gender performances. As Butler states, “Put yet in a different way, the parodic or imitative effect of gay identities works neither to copy nor to emulate heterosexuality, but rather, to expose heterosexuality as an incessant and *panicked* imitation of its own naturalized idealization.”³² And later on,

If heterosexuality is an impossible imitation of itself, an imitation that performatively constitutes itself as the original, then the imitative parody of “heterosexuality”—when and where it exists in gay cultures—is always and only an imitation of an imitation, a copy of a copy, for which there is no original....That heterosexuality is always in the act of elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that is, that it “knows” its own possibility of becoming undone....³³

It is precisely this possibility of being undone, this panic, that leads to the repetition of “gender acts.” In this way, the 1990s religious Right’s notion as expressed in “familial drag” (the repeated and pervasive repetition of images of the white nuclear family as the norm) keenly reveals this fear of “being undone”—the inner knowledge of its own contingency. Through repetition, the system (whether it be heterosexuality or the nuclear family) gains power, while offering a safety net for the ontologically panicked. And yet, behind the power,

behind the panic, is the very source of motivation—to elevate the status of the contingent, to create a universal out of a particular, to guard against diversity.

With Families Inc., everybody's in drag... and the media is the stage.

Notes

I would like to thank the colleagues, friends and professors who generously gave their feedback on this work. In particular I would like to thank Lisa Bloom, Liz Krainer, George LeGrady, Catarina Sdun, David Trend, and Stan Yogi.

1. William J. Bennett, *The De-Vahing of America: The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children* (New York: Touchstone/Simon and Schuster, 1992).
2. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 21.
3. Linda Nicholson argues that this distinction is erroneous—that due to the lack of universals in family structure, the categories "traditional" and "alternative" function "not descriptively, but normatively, legitimizing certain family types over others on the basis of dubious historical assumptions." See Linda Nicholson, "The Myth of the Traditional Family," in *Feminism and Families (Thinking Gender)*, ed. Hilde Lindemann Nelson (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 28.
4. *The Family: Preserving America's Future. A Report to the President from the White House Working Group on the Family*, 1986, p. 10 (emphasis in original).
5. Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family* (New York: Verso, 1982; 1991. 2d ed.), p. 34.
6. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. 67.
7. Zaretsky states that in medieval England "women were closer to equality with men than they later were under capitalism. For example, women participated as equals in many guilds in the fourteenth century. With the rise of capitalism they were excluded and, in general, economic opportunities for women not in families—such as spinsters or widows—declined." Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 44.
8. It would be interesting to discuss societies organized around kinship as intrinsic to the culture, but it is beyond the scope of this short paper.
9. Nicholson, p. 40.
10. Ibid., p. 29.
11. Ibid., p. 34.
12. *The Family: Preserving America's Future*, p. 16.
13. Coontz, p. 235.
14. bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 152.

15. Ibid. And it is a catch-22 situation—for when blacks congregate among themselves, they are often seen as anti-white. "Concurrently, all social manifestations of black separatism are often seen by whites as a sign of anti-white racism, when they usually represent an attempt by black people to construct places of political sanctuary where we can escape, if only for a time, white domination." bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 15.
16. Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Framer Framed* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 237-38.
17. Ibid., p. 238.
18. "Border Crossings," in Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), p. 202.
19. hooks, p. 168.
20. Ibid.
21. Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 67.
22. hooks further states: "Critically examining the association of whiteness as terror in the black imagination, deconstructing it, we both name racism's impact and help to break its hold. We decolonize our minds and our imaginations." *Black Looks*, p. 178.
23. Roddey Reid, "The Death of the Family, or, Keeping Human Beings Human," in *Posthuman Bodies (Unnatural Acts)*, ed. Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 191.
24. Ibid., p. 189.
25. *Focus on the Family Newsletter*, no. 7, July 1997 (italics in original).
26. *Time Magazine*, 6 October 1997, p. 39.
27. Sylvia Law, "Homosexuality and the Social Meaning of Gender," *Wisconsin Law Review* 2 (1988): p. 219, no. 150.
28. False Memory Syndrome Foundation, *Frequently Asked Questions*, brochure, 1993.
29. Thyra Nichols Goodeve, "Millennial Memory in American Culture: Quotidian Gothic, and Traumatic Recollection, and the Reminiscences of Monsters," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 1994, p. 138.
30. Law, p. 220.
31. It seems that the current twentieth-century conflict of "society" (shifting between the tides of modernism and postmodernism; questioning diversity, norms, etc.) and "family" (as pure) parallels the early capitalist conflict of "society" (as industrial, mechanistic) with the development of "the individual" (or subjectivity). Here "family" is similar to Zaretsky's description of "subjectivity" in its ability to act as a safety zone/retreat in the midst of larger societal changes.
32. Butler, pp. 22-23.
33. Ibid.

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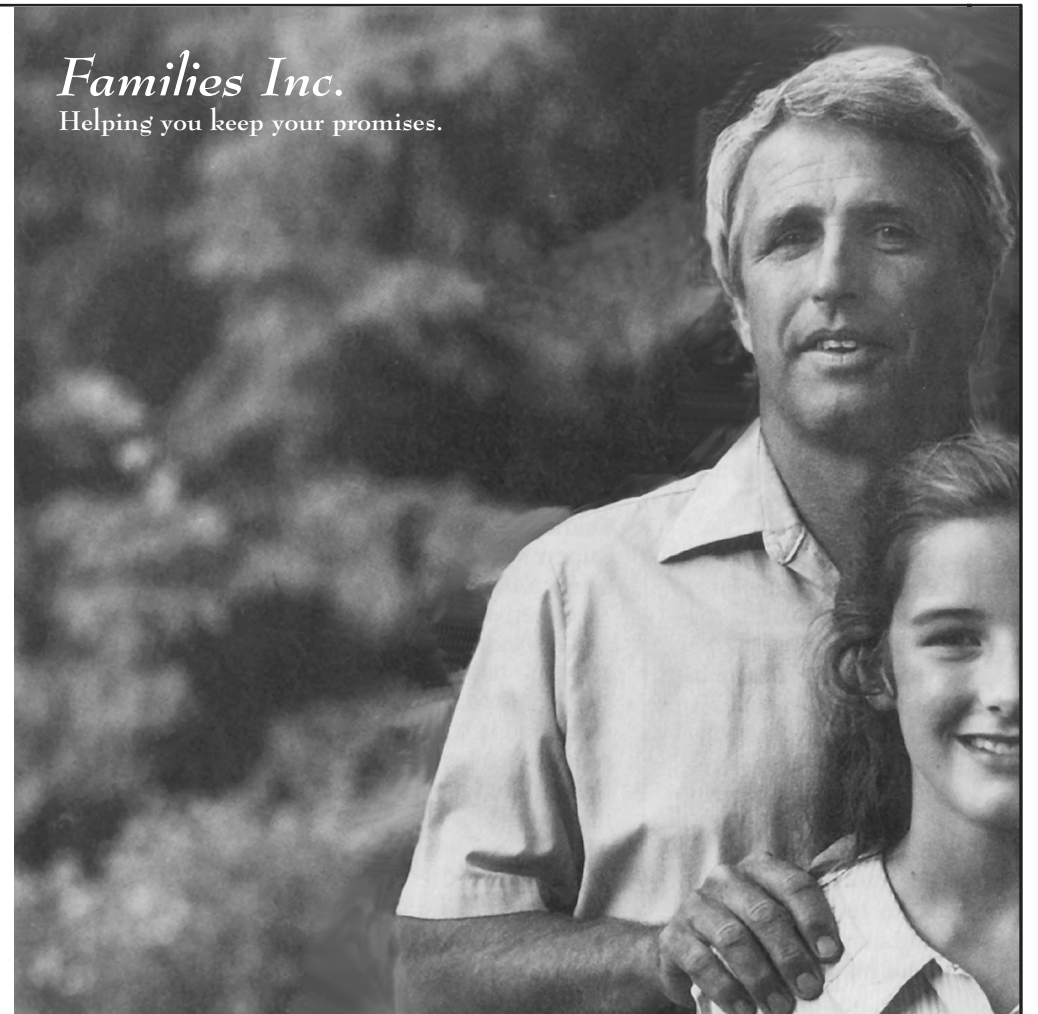
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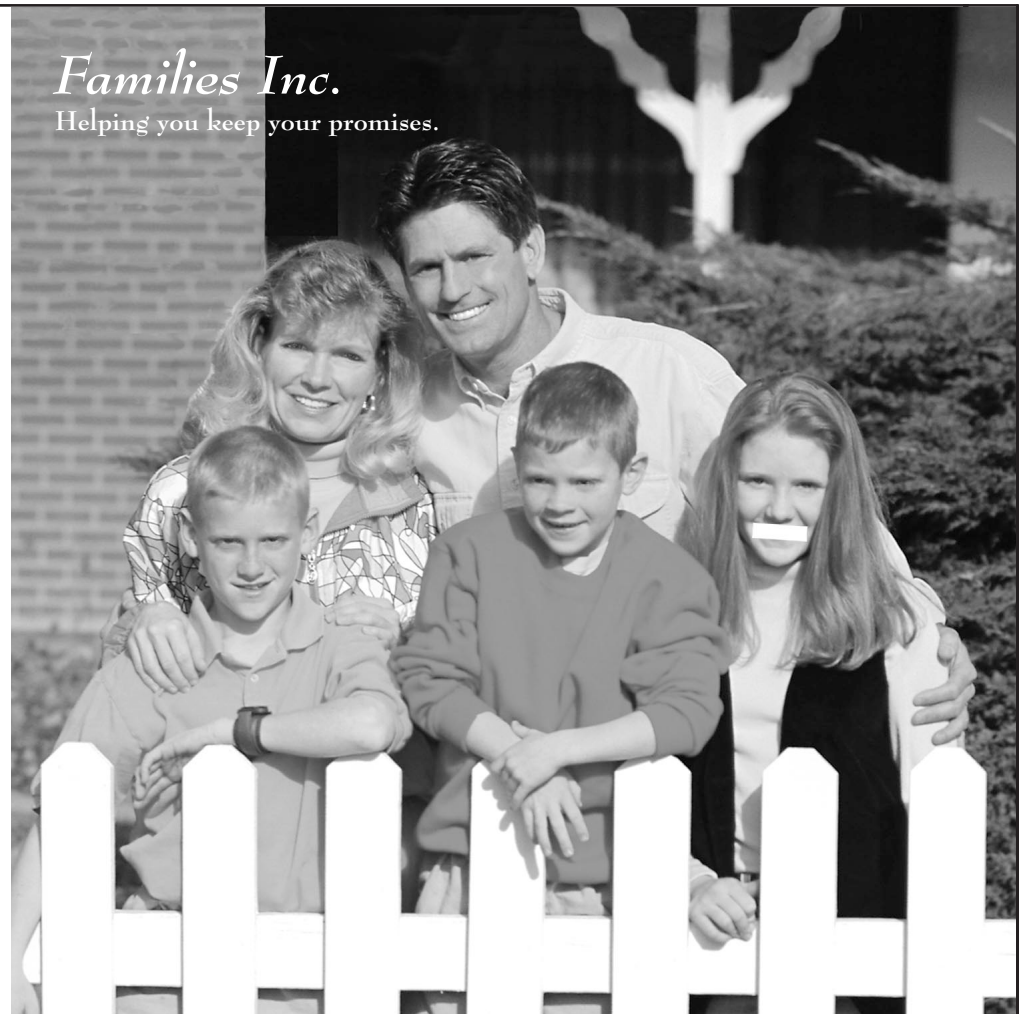
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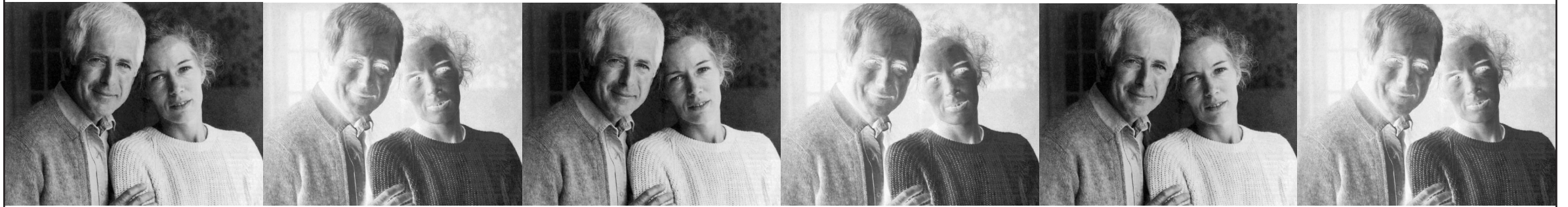
Families Inc.
Helping you keep your promises.

“Family” and its liberal body have remained the very measure
of “human,” that is to say the bedrock of acceptable social and
individual existence according to the straight white middle class.

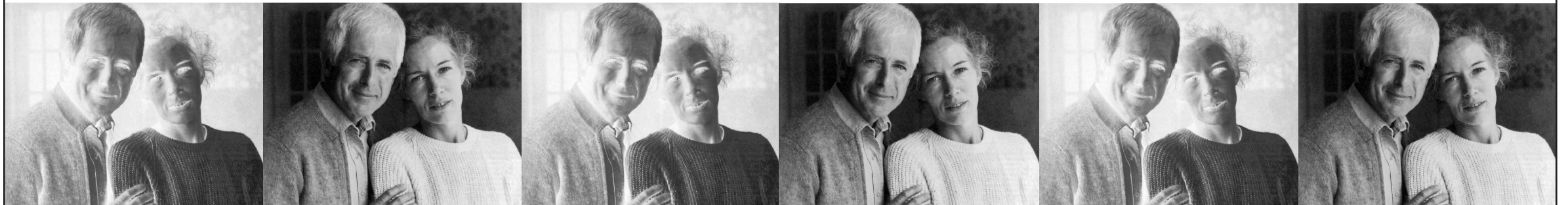
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Text by Roddey Reid

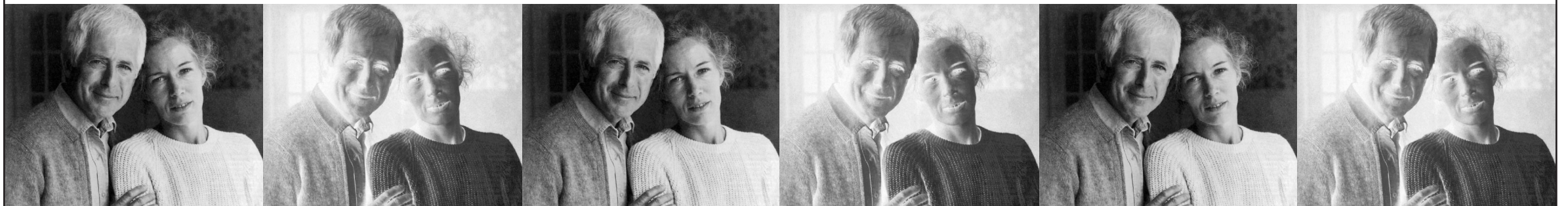
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Text by Judith Butler (edited)