

Book Review

Nelson, Margaret K. *Like Family: Narratives of Fictive Kinship*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020, 244 pages.

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What does it mean to be a kinsman? What kind of relationships are categorized as kinship? Moving beyond a narrow definition implying that kinship is just blood and legal bonds, we fall in the grey area in which borders between kinship, friendship, co-residence relations, foster care, other mothering, godparenting are blurred. *Like Family: Narratives of Fictive Kinship* by Margaret K. Nelson provides an intriguing account of these porous borders and focuses on “bond[s] between two or more people who are not related by blood, adoption or marriage but who, for at least some period, apply the family idiom to their understanding of at least some aspects of their relationships” (97). Rather than answering the question of whether or not it is *real* kinship, Margaret K. Nelson brings to the fore motivations, practices, expectations, and dynamics of like-family relations, the language of family, similarities and differences among these various types of relations, and deep reflections on limits of these relations by participants.

Through discussing individual cases of 75 white middle-class Americans aged between 20 and 80 years, the book explores three ideal types of like-family relations: “host family/guest teen” relations, “informal parents/unofficial children” relations, and like-sibling relations.

The “host family/guest teenager” relationship arises in the context of a temporary co-residence of teenagers who have their own family but lives with a family that is not their own which provides care for a teenager for this period. The reasons for such relationships can be diverse: student exchange programs, need for respite due to poor relations in natal family, or an unwillingness to change schools and break off relations with friends in a situation when parents move to another state. Co-residence is crucial for this type of like-family

relations because teens are actively involved in family practices such as shared dinners and “stupid everyday stuff” that “transform [teens] into insiders” (78). Another important point is the limited period during which the teen is like a tourist, until they are temporarily incorporated into host family, acquire a new family experience, and then return to their family. This experience doesn’t change their kinship identity, and the border between the natal and host family is preserved.

In contrast, the “informal parents/unofficial children” is long-lasting relationships. Caused by serious issues in the natal family, these relationships involve a moving and gradual distancing of children from their natal family and inclusion in a new family. In some cases, this leads to the blurring of the boundaries between the family and the like-family and may even result in the legitimization of kinship through adoption. In other cases, the uncertain status of the relationships —“Who am I for these people? Who are they for me?”— remains with that person forever. The issue of namelessness and lack of clear classification becomes more noticeable here than in the previous type of relationships.

Whereas previous forms refer to hierarchical and unequal intergenerational relations, like-sibling bonds imply long-lasting equal relationships between adult peers. They are the most uncertain relationships of all the other types, because they fall into the gap between friendship, sibling relationships, and romantic relationships, taking some parts from each relationship, but not being fully any of them. Unlike in a romantic relationship, there is no sex, nor are there role expectations as in a friendship, whereas ability to choose with whom to forge relationships is underscored as compared to kinship. Kinship and friendship based on normative expectations and past baggage contrasts with like-sibling bonds inspired by unconditional love and personal knowledge: “I can trust my brother because he’s obligated in some way because he’s my brother, whereas I can trust Ruth because she’s Ruth and she knows me” (32).

The comparison of “real” kinship and like-family relationships is a common thread throughout the book and sheds light on the fragmentary nature of like-family relations. How to explain to a person for whom you are *like* a sibling that you will celebrate Thanksgiving with *real* relatives, as required by cultural norms? Despite the importance of like-family ties, their uncertainty affects the fact that in a number of situations, such as holiday celebrations, inheritance issues, custody of dependent children and care for dependent adults, preference

is given to blood relatives. The manifestation of grief is a notable example of this: “[w]hen very close kin die, we change status: we become orphans, widows, widowers. We can explain that we have to miss work to attend the funeral of a sister or uncle. However, [...] the loss of fictive kin is unlikely to be acknowledged by others” (41).

What is the motivation behind participating in vulnerable like-family relationships? Whereas many scholars focus on substitutional function, implying that like-family relationships replace insufficient natal bonds, Margaret K. Nelson shows that like-family bonds can go hand-in-hand with close blood and legal relationships. Moreover, like-family relationships contribute to improving hostile blood relations and provide the opportunity “to do family [...] that wouldn’t have happened but for having what [people] learned about creating family through friends” (22). What is perhaps most remarkable is the fact that the phrase “like family” has different meanings depending on the quality of blood relations. While in the case of close relationships, “like family” means “like *my* family relations,” unsatisfactory relations in a natal family change this meaning to “like an *ideal* family that does not exist, but is dreamed of.”

Terminological and theoretical issues also matter. In social studies there are many terms referring to non-biological/legal kinship, for example, “voluntary kinship,” “chosen family,” “pseudo kinship,” “quasi kinship.” Nelson conceptualizes like-family relations through the concept of “fictive kinship” and clarifies that there is no clear definition of it. She points out that it relies on the informants’ language and terms. However, “none of [...] respondents used the language of ‘fictive kinship’ [...] and not unreasonably, they became quite irritated when [researcher] did, [and] felt ‘dissed’ by a language that suggests that what they have is made up, not real, not significant” (12). She argues that “as participants use the language of family, whether intentionally or not, they bolster their fictive-kin relationship” (12) but given critical studies on this term in social anthropology and the logic of the emic approach, applying this term does not seem entirely justified.

Two overlapping theoretical perspectives are combined in this book. In the first part, the “doing family” framework prevails and, consequently, the analysis of family practices is presented. However, towards the end of the book, and especially in the third part, the analysis of the discourse, the language of the family, issues of blurred classifications, and namelessness of like-family

relationships comes to the fore. The latter perspective challenges the logic of “doing family” because both family and like-family members participate in doing family but in the most cases like-family members continue to feel just “like a family.”

Like Family demonstrates the complexity of such relationships that have their own logic and are not reducible to other relationships. On one end of the scale, there is the uncertainty and absence of appropriate language, role expectations, legal recognition, and rights. On the other end of the scale, there is the stable desire and ability of people to love, and break the rigid boundaries of classification. The one question *Like Family* does not address is how it will all balance out.