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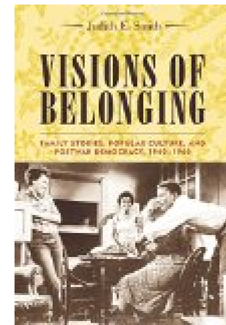

Reviewed by Crista Deluzio (Department of History, Southern Methodist University)
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The Personal and the Political: Ordinary Families and the Possibilities of Democracy in Mid-Twentieth-Century America

Between 1940 and 1960 a group of writers associated with the cultural and political left created stories about family life that enlarged conceptions of American democracy. These artists imagined the rights and privileges of citizenship to extend beyond the purview of the white middle-class male to include the working class, ethnic and racial minorities, as well as women. It is the story of such efforts to articulate "new visions of national belonging" (p. 2), as well as the limits of those visions in fully realizing a "multiracial democratic citizenship" (p. 7), that Judith Smith tells with great care and erudition in this book. Smith examines the production of family narratives by writers and the ways in which these stories were received by audiences, paying particular attention to divergent interpretations of them in the black and white press. She fascinatingly traces the various incarnations of particular works as they were revised from novel to stage play to film to television show and considers how the political messages of each version were altered by the medium in which they were expressed, the particular actors involved in the process of cultural production, and the exigencies of the given historical moment. She contextualizes her readings of the cultural texts themselves in relation to a rich array of social history sources, including biography and memoir, published and unpublished sources from the publishing, theater, motion picture, and television industries, and the mainstream and alternative press. Smith admiringly conveys the optimism and commitment to social equality upheld by this group of artists, especially their belief in the vital role to be played by art and popular culture in affecting social change. She also records the forestalling of such promises at mid-century as a result of persistent racial prejudice and discrimination, the rising tide of anticommunism, and the difficulties in representing the thorny relationship between the public and the private in family life. "These stories and the responses to them," Smith writes, "provide a point of entry into an extraordinary time, when the possibilities for social transformation seemed boundless and yet were also fiercely contested" (p. 3).

Smith begins by tracing the roots of wartime and postwar family stories in the political commitments of those artists and activists involved in the creation of popular theater in the 1930s. Theater troops such as the Group Theatre, the Negro People's Theatre, and the Federal Theatre Project posed challenges to the exclusionary meanings of citizenship propagated by earlier radio formula drama, which disparagingly stereotyped racial and ethnic groups and marginalized women on the basis of their supposedly excessive sentimentality. Radio itself was transformed by these efforts. Beginning in the mid-1930s and becoming more imperative following the attack on Pearl Harbor, public interest radio drew directly from the progressive currents of popular theater to present shows that "legitimate[d] celebrations of ordinary people as the backbone of popular democracy" (p. 21). Representations of the "melting-pot platoon" and the "Negro soldier" (p. 36) in theater, radio, and film during the war years linked soldiering to expanded citizen-

ship rights and alluded to the possibility of a democratic polity in which men of all social backgrounds would be welcomed as full participants. Ethnic lines were more easily crossed than racial ones in such representations, however, and ultimately these failed to fundamentally counter images of black men as inferior outsiders or to undermine the segregationist practices, policies, and laws that were endemic in American society.

Smith then turns her attention to three types of wartime and postwar family stories in which meanings of national belonging were formulated and contested. The first of these, "looking back stories" (p. 39), portrayed working-class ethnic families of the distant past as emblems of the ordinary American family, thereby extending the concept of citizenship across ethnic and class, if not racial, lines. Betty Smith's 1943 bestselling novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, was heralded by reviewers and readers alike for its realistic but also respectful portrayal of working-class family life. Smith, who grew up in a working-class Brooklyn neighborhood and went on to write for the Federal Theater Project, drew on the tradition of social problem drama in her novel, but ended up proposing individual familial, rather than collective political, solutions to social problems. For Betty Smith and her audience, the Nolan family served as an exemplar of the values of hard work, the pursuit of educational opportunity, cosmopolitanism, and self-reliance that constituted the surest route to achieving the social mobility, assimilation, and self-sufficiency upon which a revitalized postwar American democracy would depend. The film adaptation of the novel, released in March 1945, further elaborated upon the conservative messages of the novel. Directed by leftist Elia Kazan, the film ultimately bore the political imprint of producer Louis Leighton, who was a harsh critic of the New Deal. Notably missing from the film version, Judith Smith points out, was Betty Smith's rendition of autonomous female characters. In the film, the agency of the young protagonist Francie is occluded by her overwhelming concern for male approval. Likewise, the role of the mother Katie as the family's economic provider is derisively depicted as inhibiting marital closeness and promoting "a spiritually bankrupt materialism" (p. 69) in her children. Judith Smith suggests that the novel did more than the film in envisioning new possibilities for children's empowerment and gender equality. While Judith Smith's primary focus in this book is on cultural constructions of race and ethnicity, she might have said more about the connections between the social categories of age and gender and mid-century imaginings of more expansive or alternative forms of citizenship. How did Betty Smith's representations of Francie, Katie, and the sexually expressive Aunt Sissy reconfigure the contours of female citizenship for her readers? What did those soldiers and veterans who admitted to sharing "every one of Francie's emotions" (p. 61) expose about the limitations of prototypical male citizenship? What did they suggest about the sorts of rights and responsibilities a more gender inclusive form of citizenship might entail? Did the female adolescent readers who "continued to plumb [*Tree*'s] emotional terrain" (pp. 73-74), long after the novel lost its widespread popular appeal, have their own things to say about the ways in which they were excluded from social and political life and how they might be more fully incorporated in it?

The second series of texts Smith examines in the looking back genre illustrate similar themes. Kathryn Forbes's novel, *Mama's Bank Account*, also published in 1943, was eventually reincarnated as a Broadway play entitled *I Remember Mama*, a film of the same name, and a long-running serial television drama. The Hansens are a decidedly harmonious working-class family of Norwegian descent living in San Francisco in the early part of the twentieth century. Like the Nolans, their ethnic origins and class status are overshadowed by their "ordinariness," which is marked by their exemplary adherence to those "old-world values" (p. 79) that facilitate their assimilation into the American mainstream and ensure the security of their private nuclear household. The *Mama* stories thus pushed against boundaries that excluded ethnic minorities and the working class from conceptions of American citizenship, while leaving proscriptions against racial and gender inclusion intact. Indeed, with each new version of the Hansen family narrative, "remembering Mama" increasingly takes the form of idealizing Mama Hansen for her nurturing capacity, a contribution glorified for the ways it enables and enhances the well-being of the private family, rather than for its possible relation to any larger transformative social vision or political goal.

The second group of family narratives Smith explores is "trading places stories" (p. 107). During the mid to late 1940s, works of "white antifascist writers" (p. 110) such as Lillian Smith's novel *Strange Fruit* (1944), Arnaud D'Usseau and James Gow's play *Deep Are the Roots*(ran on Broadway from September 1945 to November 1946), and Arthur Laurents's drama *Home of the Brave* (1945) challenged the racial exclusivity of Nazi ideology with stories of characters who loved across the color line. If racial boundaries were maintained by the rigid enforcement of sexual and gender norms, then creating char-

acters that were unable or unwilling to abide by such norms exposed the arbitrariness and oppressiveness of racial classification and segregation and became a vehicle for imagining a more racially inclusive social and political order. As was the case with looking back stories, trading places stories were only partially successful in realizing this vision, as the range of critics, readers, and viewers' responses to these works attest. The central conundrum with which the creators and the audiences of trading places narratives wrestled, Judith Smith asserts, was this: "To speak of interracial love could suppress a profound history of white sexual coercion and brutality. But to leave interracial love as *unspoken* supported the central tenet of white supremacy that racial lines could be fixed, that love, admiration, and desire could be effectively cordoned off" (p. 109). In attempting to reveal the illusory nature of racial categorization, these stories also obscured the historical specificity of racial domination and struggle that always already shaped the capacity for "human" connection across lines of social difference.

Other trading places stories, including Arthur Miller's novel *Focus*(1945), Richard Brooks's novel *The Brick Foxhole* (1945) and its film version, *Crossfire*(1947), and Laura Hobson's novel *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) and its film adaptation of the same name (appearing in 1947), raised the specters of anti-Semitism and homophobia as a way to protest racialization and bigotry more generally. Smith finds that these stories, too, were at once "provocative" and "unconvincing" (p. 142) for the audiences that encountered them. Some critics expressed hope that these stories' condemnation of domestic antifascism portended the arrival of a more egalitarian social order at a moment in the immediate postwar period when such an achievement seemed possible. Others, however, registered skepticism about whether one form of discrimination could stand in for another and questioned the assimilationist goals these stories promoted. In 1949, a spate of "race-themed films" (p. 167) made their way onto the big screen that, for the first time in Hollywood history, presented ordinary black characters challenging racial boundaries in public and private life. This final group of trading places stories Smith examines includes Stanley Kramer's *Home of the Brave*, Louis De Rochemont's *Lost Boundaries*, Darryl Zanuck's *Pinky*, Dore Schary's *Intruder in the Dust*, and Darryl Zanuck and Joe Mankiewicz's *No Way Out*. The stories told in these films of racial passing, interracial romance, and "everyday" racial struggle; the films' narrative resolutions; and the decisions made by casting directors about the race of the actors to play various roles sparked debates within the movie industry and among critics over the meanings and implications of racial (in)determinancy. They also raised questions about how Hollywood was to represent the causes of racial oppression and what sorts of solutions to the problem of racial injustice it might propagate. In the face of growing anticommunist attacks against civil rights efforts, this last round of trading places stories failed to address directly the historical and social bases of racism or to advance political means of redress. Instead, they worked to "naturalize the exclusionary aspects of the ordinary" (p. 5), depicting racial struggle in individual, psychological terms rather than as shaped by larger forces of historical, social, or political power.

The final collection of family stories Smith examines are "everyman stories" (p. 205). The model for the everyman story was Arthur Miller's hugely popular and critically acclaimed play *Death of a Salesman*, which opened in New York in February 1949. Smith traces Miller's affiliations with and contributions to the political and cultural left in the 1930s and 1940s. With the production of the award-winning drama *All My Sons* in 1947, Miller earned the reputation as "the popular social dramatist of the postwar years" (p. 216). In Willy Loman he created a character that represented the quintessentially ordinary American man whose suffering and failures exposed the emptiness of the American dream. Of concern to Smith are the ways in which Miller's "everyman strategy also reinforced conventional boundaries of American nationhood, identity, and masculinity" (p. 226). In both *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, Miller shifted the focus of family drama away from female sentimentalism and onto concerns with male relationships and psychology. At the same time, he dismissed family life as a viable source of social change by counterpoising the possibilities for a masculine, public, and political identity with the parochialism of domesticity and the confining claims of overbearing and overly complacent women. Miller's representation of the ordinary also allowed for the dominant reception of the play as a story about "timeless dilemmas" (p. 232), rather than historically situated social conflict. In the face of growing anticommunist attacks on the cultural left, and finally on his own work, Miller was unwavering in his support for leftist causes and ideals. But he also defended his play in ways that encouraged further interpretations of the tragedy of Willy's life as the product of individual psychology. In various commentary on the play throughout the 1950s, he drew attention to his main character's "transcendent universality," with the effect of replicating "the normative and the ex-

clusionary" (p. 240) at the expense of broadening conceptions of national belonging and citizenship. Miller's vision of who could represent the ordinary American did not go unchallenged in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Smith contrasts his conception of universalism with that of Richard Durham in his radio drama on black history, *Destination Freedom*, broadcasted on the Chicago NBC affiliate WMAQ beginning in June 1948. For Durham, African Americans were the "universal people" (p. 212) because they represented the struggles of all men and women around the world against patriarchy, racism, and colonialism. Durham's program was canceled in August 1950 under pressure by anticommunists, whereas Miller's play, with its narrower vision of Americanism, went on to achieve the status of a classic.

Another genre of everyman stories written and produced by Hollywood progressives in the 1950s was the "marital realism" narrative (p. 242). Attempting to "democratize and socially locate romance" (p. 245), these stories challenged normative expectations for family life based on consumption, male breadwinning, and female homemaking. Instead of glamorizing love and romance and rooting these in adherence to conventional gender roles, marital realism stories depicted ordinary men and women struggling in the face of economic hardship, groping toward more equitable gender partnerships, and navigating tensions between ethnic and working-class claims for the primacy of loyalty and obligation to the extended family and the modern values of heterosexual intimacy and privacy. The "breakthrough" (p. 274) marital realism film was Paddy Chayefsky's 1955 movie*Marty*, the love story of an ordinary Italian butcher and a lonely schoolteacher. *Marty*'s first incarnation was as a live television drama that made its debut in May 1953. Smith documents Chayefsky's ties to the left and follows his early career as a television playwright. She also explores the possibilities of the medium of television in telling ordinary family stories that implicated social dissent and the limitations of the television industry in sustaining social criticism from the left, especially with the growing power of the blacklist. Both the television and the film versions of *Marty* succeeded in broadening conceptions of the ordinary family to encompass ethnic minorities. But as with Miller's work, "their cultural power reinforced the racial exclusion articulated in the implicit whiteness of everyman stories" (p. 256). As well, under the weight of threatened anticommunist reprisal, *Marty* and other marital realism stories ended up disguising their social critique all too well, resulting in an endorsement of the private family relations and values they set out to rebuke.

The key postwar everyman story that explicitly included African American families within the realm of the ordinary was Lorraine Hansberry's award-winning 1959 Broadway play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Smith recounts in detail the development of Hansberry's affiliations with the radical left from her upbringing on the South Side of Chicago by self-made parents who were avid supporters of civil rights, through her years as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin, and following her move to Harlem in 1950 when she began writing for the black liberationist journal *Freedom*. All of this poised her, by her mid 20s, to begin work on a play about an ordinary black family whose everyday relationships, yearnings, and struggles spoke to historically situated experiences of racial discrimination and conveyed the necessity of collective political action for the achievement of the racial justice that was crucial for the full realization of American democracy. In telling the story of the Youngers, Smith argues, Hansberry attempted "to articulate an expansive social vision that was racially inclusive without being overdetermined by racial parameters and that posited a mutually constitutive relationship between family and society without letting one overwhelm the other" (p. 283). That audiences and reviewers diverged so greatly in their responses to the play, most notably along lines of race, reveals that Hansberry was only partially successful in these endeavors. Black critics recognized Hansberry's political message and embraced the play for its challenge to normative cultural family values, its protests against practices of racial exclusion, and its wide-reaching prescriptions for social transformation. Most white viewers, however, insisted on interpreting the Youngers' experiences in "color-blind" (p. 283) and apolitical terms, emphasizing the universal and private nature of the family's struggles and failing or refusing to perceive Hansberry's social critique or her calls for social change.

Judith Smith's consistently nuanced and impeccably informed analysis of this broad range of wartime and postwar cultural texts emanating from the political left convincingly shows that all of these family stories, in one way or another, failed to imagine, articulate, or convey a viable "interplay between familial dynamics and social change" (p. 320). From Betty Smith and Kathryn Forbes, audiences were presented with admirably close, mutually supportive families held together by strong women whose values of solidarity and cooperation were, nonetheless, directed inward toward the realization of private security. Postwar stories of interracial

love and marital realism struggled to express "the interdependence of private dreams and social forces" (p. 245). Even more starkly, Arthur Miller's "antidomestic sensibility" (p. 219) set feminized family life in direct opposition to superior forms of serious male public, political endeavor. And, Lorraine Hansberry's critique of racial discrimination was ignored by white audiences by the very virtue of it being "a female-authored family drama" (p. 319) that could be disassociated from the concerns of the public sphere. In recognizing the limitations of this body of cultural work, Smith also draws our attention to the vital importance of efforts made by those on the left at mid-century in wrestling with and striving to sustain connections between family life and social change, particularly in the face of dominant cultural and political forces that resisted such association at every turn. *Visions of Belonging* raises provocative questions about how people in other times and places have thought about, represented, and, indeed, exercised relationships between "family, community, and citizenship" (p. 201) and about how we do so in our own time. What role can art and popular culture play in making us more aware of the ways in which the psychological hurts and interpersonal tensions we experience in family life–the violence, despair, loneliness, and anger–are shaped by historically rooted dynamics of social power? What role can they play in revealing that the love, support, and comfort we garner from family life are also embedded and enabled by the social conditions in which we live? Can we better train ourselves and more consciously teach our children to read the family stories available to us against the grain, so as to see beyond or behind persistent efforts to depict the family in exclusively private terms? How can we mobilize the resources and transform the relations of family life to the end of bringing about the kinds of changes we want to see in the world? As Judith Smith's work shows, attempts to tell family stories that provoke such questions, even if they fall far short of realizing their creators' expectations for social change, are well worth the endeavor.

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