

May-2010

Book Review: Everybody's Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America

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Recommended Citation

Lambert, Kristen (2010). Book Review: Everybody's Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11(4), 200-203.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol11/iss4/16>

Everybody's Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America. 2009. Gillian Harkins. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 317 pp. (Index included). \$25.00 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Kristen Lambert¹

In *Everybody's Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America* Gillian Harkins connects popular media on incest from the 1980s to the 1990s to neoliberal politics. Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach, Harkins juxtaposes literary texts with court cases, research studies, and reviews, building her argument that women's texts played a key role in neoliberal strategies regarding family and family values. Harkins focuses on several texts, many of which highlight father-daughter incest, including Carolivia Herron's semi-autobiographical novel, *Thereafter Johnnie* (1991), Dorothy Allison's semi-autobiographical novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), a 1998 psychological study on intergenerational sex known as the Rind Study, Kathryn Harrison's memoir *The Kiss* (1997), and Sapphire's fictional novel, *Push* (1996). Harkins postulates that social concerns regarding father-daughter incest created new cultural forms and that these new forms were used to "do the work of neoliberalism."

Harkins historicizes discourses of incest, starting with Freud and the incest taboo, and works her way into the memory wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Harkins notes how the incest taboo both regulated and normalized certain sexual relations prior to second wave feminism, and that to this day, incest continues to define moral boundaries regarding sexuality. Connecting incest and pedophilia, Harkins notes the odd fact that during that time the public consumed stories of incest in self-help books, TV talk shows, and media journalism, but rallied around laws and policies targeting stranger molestation (pedophilia). She stresses that these two focal points – incest and pedophilia – were then collapsed under the broader heading of child sexual abuse and the notion of the "child at risk."

In the chapter "Legal Fantasies: Populist Trauma and the Theater of Memory" Harkins outlines the memory wars, in which cases involving women's recovered memories of childhood incestuous relations with their fathers were at first embraced and then discredited in court and popular opinion. Most recovered memories were considered inadmissible in a court of law. This judicial blow was felt simultaneously outside the courtroom as public opinion turned against recovered memories, and eventually "false memory syndrome" became a part of the popular lexicon.

Harkins establishes how recovered memories were connected to trauma in general and post traumatic stress disorder in particular. Harkins makes the connection that in linking incest, through recovered memories, to PTSD and trauma, all child abuse came to

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seen as traumatic. Yet, Harkins contends, neoliberalism went one step further in relegating family values and moralizing sexual freedom by framing all intergenerational sexual relations as traumatic.

In establishing this convoluted history of incest, Harkins proceeds to delve into the role women's semi-autobiographies and memoirs played in both reaffirming and resisting neoliberal politics. Harkins' work challenges criticisms lobbied against women's incest literature, which was criticized for adopting an internal look at incest and failing to align incest narratives with institutional systems of oppression. By tracing discourses of incest through these texts, Harkins argues that, to the contrary, this body of literature exposes changing family relations, the repositioning of family and family values in relation to the nation, and evolving discourses of child sexual abuse. Through textual literary analysis, Harkins locates a space where female survivors of incest could tell their stories and in some cases be embraced by the public at large and even gain mainstream success. In this respect *Everybody's Family Romance* is as much a sociological and historical examination of incest, as it is a defense of women's personal experiences on the subject as told within U.S. literature.

Harkins critiques form/genre as much as the representations themselves, exposing the ideological underpinnings of the family romance in relation to race and class. Harkins notes how African American female writers wrote autobiographies and novels dealing with incest as early as the 1970s. However, when recovered memories gained nationwide attention in the 1980s, these novels were "redescribed," or reappropriated, into an informal canon known as incest literature. Yet, as Harkins illustrates, the fit was never quite right. A close reading of Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie* suggests that the novel's relationship to family romance is strained. Harkins argues that the history of U.S. slavery troubles the family romance. Since this literary tradition relies on U.S. conceptions of self-determination, which is in turn linked to one's family history, "the genealogies of U.S. slavery only become legible as 'a secret within a family, a secret about family, and a secret denying the possibility of family.'" In this respect, Harkins argues that Herron's decision to locate her semi-autobiographical narrative within the family romance is an act of resistance.

Everybody's Family Romance continues analyzing incest literature through a myriad of marginalized identities. In her chapter on Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* Harkins addresses issues of race and class. Harkins positions Allison's novel as an example of survivor realism, a genre she argues is a combination of family romance (which locates ideological contradictions within the nuclear family) and social realism (which locates ideological contradictions within society). It is through this combination that Allison's novel is able to represent a protagonist who must overcome institutional forms of oppression which manifest themselves within the "domain of the family." In her quest to explain the success of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, despite the book's incendiary subject matter, Harkins turns to the political climate at this time. Connecting the book's representation of white working class families to issues of xenophobia related to the U.S. Immigration Act of 1990, Harkins contends that Allison was able to capitalize on the reemergence of narratives revolving around white labor and "culturally authentic white ethnic families" in popular culture.

In what is arguably the strongest chapter in the book, Harkins explores three texts in relation to one another: the 1998 psychological study by Bruce Rind, Robert Bauserman, and Philip Tromovitch, which examined whether or not intergenerational sex inevitably leads to trauma; Kathryn Harrison's memoir *The Kiss* (1997); and Sapphire's novel *Push* (1996). Harkins connects the reception of these three texts to the sex panics of the 1990s, which often masked homophobic panics.

Discussing the Rind study first, Harkins notes how the researchers' conclusions caused a panic, and organizations such as the Family Research Council set out to destroy the study and the researchers behind it. Moreover, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution publicly condemning the study and calling for strict guidelines regarding future publications involving possible provocative research. Harkins uses the Rind study as a jumping point to analyze the arguments regarding social constructions of children as innocent, asexual, and incapable of participating in consensual sex.

Harkins is able to balance the fine line between acknowledging that child sexual abuse exists and is a grave concern and negating childhood sexuality all together. In her interpretation of the Rind study Harkins notes that "although girls more often experience sex in the context of force or dysfunctional families, in those cases there is no empirically solid evidence that the *sexual* experience and not the force and the dysfunction cause harm." In this respect Harkins recognizes that underage girls may be willing participants in intergenerational sexual relations. By focusing on the context of these sexual relationships, Harkins opens up a space for girls to be sexual but one that also recognizes that power imbalances can create trauma-inducing situations for girls.

In transitioning from the Rind study to Harrison's memoir and Sapphire's novel, Harkins examines the similar backlash these female authors experienced in literary reviews and the public press. In her discussion of *The Kiss*, Kathryn Harrison's memoir on her consensual participation in an incestuous relationship with her father, Harkins notes that reviewers were uncomfortable with the text given that this particular story was "too literal." Harkins argues that reviewers relied on puns as a way to express their discomfort with the text and provide titillation, given that the memoir itself offers few details regarding the father-daughter sexual relationship. Harkins spends the remaining section exploring psychoanalytical readings of *The Kiss*.

In the remainder of this chapter Harkins examines the sensation caused by the publication of Sapphire's novel, *Push*. Harkins particularly notes how Katie Roiphe discredited the literary merit of the novel in her review. According to Harkins, Roiphe vehemently disliked the novel for its use of "'non-standard' English" and the fact that Sapphire's manuscript incited a bidding war. These two aspects, and the novel's focus on a young black illiterate girl who gives birth to two children by her father, caused Roiphe to suggest that the novel relied on sensationalism and was successful due to its shock value. Harkins disagrees with Roiphe's assessment of the novel's language, and spends the remaining pages analyzing how *Push* critiques society's assertion that social mobility must be connected to the use of proper grammar and language.

Overall, *Everybody's Family Romance* is a rich and useful text that has plenty to offer for students and scholars across multiple disciplines. Harkins is an associate professor in the English Department at the University of Washington, and as a result she tends to favor textual analysis as her primary methodology. Harkins is cautious about

elevating her readings of the texts as the correct interpretation and focuses instead on creating a dialogue between her insights and what has already been written on these semi-autobiographies, memoirs, and novels. My only complaint is that when Harkins discusses wanting to examine popular media, she equates this with print media, spending next to no time discussing the role of film or television in perpetuating and/or negating a neoliberal agenda. Especially given the time frame for her discussion, when daytime talk shows were at the peak of their popularity with Oprah, Sally Jesse Raphael, Geraldo Rivera, and Phil Donahue each running their own show, Harkin's book could have benefitted from an analysis of television's role in the memory wars.

While *Everybody's Family Romance* is certainly intended for academics in English literature, Harkins' analysis of incest discourses in U.S. history and literature is beneficial to anyone studying childhood development, gender and sexuality, and U.S. History. Her section on the Rind study is timely given current concerns regarding girls and sexuality played out in the moral panics revolving around Miley Cyrus' Vanity Fair photo shoot, Bristol Palin's teen pregnancy, and issue of girls and sexting. What propels Harkins' work is her willingness to bring race and class into the discussion of incest in twentieth century U.S. literature. Harkins' analysis of *Push* will no doubt serve as a useful reference for anyone analyzing the controversy surrounding the 2009 film adaptation by Lee Daniels. Harkins' work raises more questions than it answers, especially in terms of how to conceptualize sexual consent in relation to minors. Yet her ambitious undertaking and careful research paves a way for understanding how moralizing sexual freedom, even when feminists are behind the moralization, may do more harm than good.