The family as a fundamental social, emotional, and economic unit is undergoing change, especially—though by no means exclusively—in the Western, industrialized world. It is equally true that the family is always in flux, with models ranging from nuclear to extended, local to transnational. Recently, however, the idea that a global “we” could be entering a “postfamilial” age has gained momentum. One factor that policy-makers and demographers struggle with, cannot measure, or even overlook is the influence of immigration, both legal and illegal, on the structure, and, no less importantly, on the stories of the contemporary family. Instead of proclaiming its immanent obsolescence, I argue in this study that the family is undergoing a process of reimagining itself, reconfiguring its constituents under specific cultural, national, and regional conditions that include the influences of migration and immigration.

In Europe, defined for heuristic purposes as the member states of the current European Union (EU), it has become commonplace to accept declining birth rates, stagnant or failing economies, and personal choices regarding the pursuit of professional success as the common causes of reduced family size or the motivations for leaving the care of the elderly or infirm to paid employees. From the perspective of historical demographics, some scholars observe these trends as products of late nineteenth century social, economic, and political developments, all of which underwrite “household fission,” “smaller households,” and “smaller, more dispersed families” (Goody 2000: 166, 168). At the site of such a “typical” European family, discourses about immigration push hot-button issues. Since Europe’s industrialization, societies have constructed the “family” to align with dominant moral codes: “The family is a social construct which entails beliefs and
values defining family members and relationships with them. It thus constitutes a moral order, albeit with widely diverse understandings of what that order should be” (Grillo 2008: 16). Immigration and migration can disrupt, reinforce, and reimagine that “moral order” within and beyond the hegemony of individual national traditions.

While demographers exercise caution when suggesting that immigration might supplement declining and aging “European” populations, more radical voices insist that the sacredness of the family and the identity of the nation should be congruent. Increasingly, such proclamations come from the radical right. At the same time, immigration issues intersect with family life in all its manifestations. In Europe, migrants and immigrants live, work, and define family in the plural form. As I contend, competing definitions of family in many of the EU member states are predicated on tensions between citizens and (im) migrants. In some of the literature and films that focus on family narratives, the encounter between (im)migrants and “native” locals raise questions about citizenship, national identity, and transnational communities. The aspect of the transnational, broadly defined as “various kinds of global or cross-border connections” (Vertovec 2001: 573), intersects with a particular vein of the national imaginary, one that highlights the desire for individual integration narratives that represent a larger and more hospitable nation.

In national imaginaries, the family is reconfigured to reflect a cross-cultural, often cross-border ideality. In this imagined geography, the conventional model family consists of more than a male breadwinner, a working professional mother, and a small number of minor children. Instead, transnational families are portrayed in a commitment to a different, not qualitatively better or worse, set of values. Sometimes, these alternative models of family demonstrate stronger kinship and blood bonds than their presumptive “European” counterparts. In general terms, transnational families are defined “as families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely ‘familyhood’, even across national borders” (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002: 3). The purpose of my investigation is to explore the nature of that “familyhood” as it plays out in a particular national imaginary: that of the contemporary Federal Republic of Germany. This particular nation, as it undergoes a transition from a nation of emigration to one of immigration, serves as an exemplary site, located at the intersection of European identities, trends, and resistance.