7. Kith and Kin

Kith is an odd word, rolling off the tongue awkwardly. It only ever seems to show up attached to *kin*, but has a long lineage in English of at least a thousand years. At one point it meant 'knowledge of something', or the 'land you are from', but now has come to mean something close to 'friends' or everyone you are close to who is not a direct relative. It gestures toward a phrase we are interested in: good relationships, which might be a synonym for substantive concern for the other.

Kin is a word in much more common circulation, recognizable on the covers of hipster lifestyle magazines and TV shows revolving around the 'unbreakable bonds of blood and family' that are repeatedly broken. Kin evokes family primarily, but gestures to larger values of hearth-and-home, of simpler fidelities and wholesomeness. Certain environmental movements enthusiastically call for us to view the more-than-human as *kin* in the hope that if we see other forms of life as family, we will recognize them as being just like us, and thus we will be less likely to damage them.

Donna Haraway has famously written often about 'making kin' with other animals, notably in *When Species Meet* and *Staying with the Trouble*:

> Making kin seems to me the thing that we most need to be doing in a world that rips us apart from each other [...] By kin I mean those who have an enduring mutual, obligatory, non-optional, you-can't-just-

> cast-that-away-when-it-gets-inconvenient, enduring relatedness that carries consequences.[1]

This sounds lovely of course, and Haraway is someone whose writing we admire very often, but narratives of kinship, when shaped by the hands of Western philosophical traditions, hazard something perilous: reenacting orderings that forge togetherness as an identity of like-recognizing-like. Recognizing or imagining another as kin, maybe especially across species might be a moving experience, but what about all the others who you do not recognize, who are incommensurably different, who you share little or nothing in common? Ordering relations based on kinship threatens to re-enact and fix the world in place. There is a reason that muscular national and imperial projects tell us that we have to protect the Motherland at all costs, or that citizens must give to everything for the Fatherland – they wrap us in suffocating and totalizing renditions of togetherness, kinship from which there is no escape and no argument.

Christina Sharpe starts her essay 'Lose Your Kin' citing Sadiya Hartman: "Slavery is the ghost in the machine of kinship." She then cites racist US Senators Hammond and Thurmond as a route to detailing how white kinship recognizes itself while refusing to acknowledge Black personhood, assigning non-whites the designation of property and concretizing the whiteness of kin as an ordering mechanism:

> Slavery is the ghost in the machine of kinship. Kinship relations structure the nation. Capitulation to their current configurations is the continued enfleshment of that ghost.
>
> Refuse reconciliation to ongoing brutality. Refuse to feast on the corpse of others. Rend the fabric of the kinship narrative. Imagine otherwise. Remake the world. Some of us have never had any other choice.[2]

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1 Steve Paulson, 'Making Kin: An Interview with Donna Haraway, in LA Review of Books,' December 6th 2019.

2 Christina Sharpe, 'Lose Your Kin', The New Inquiry, November 16th, 2016.

The idea of seeing a stranger, or animal or lake and desiring the comfortable recognition, the enduring relatedness of kin is always attractive, but it carries with it the full weight of white supremacy and coloniality. There are probably routes to making 'kin' a decent vehicle for being-together, for blowing up the idea of family so thoroughly and insistently that it becomes permeable and malleable enough to remake the worlds around us. There might well be other traditions that can view kin in entirely different lights, when being related does not mean same-recognizing-same. But in settler and Western grammars, invoking kin risks far too much. If 'kinship relations structure the nation', why not imagine other routes to community?

As Judith Butler writes: "It is not possible to separate questions of kinship from property relations (and conceiving persons as property) and from the fictions of "bloodline," as well as the national and racial interests by which these lines are sustained."[3] When ecological movements insist on 'kinning' it sounds to our ears far too much like drawing the more-than-human into existing relations that structure the world-as-it-is. It sounds like closing the loop, making complete an ordering that sees some persons as recognizable and others as disposable property.

So what then of kith? We are not really even sure how that idea might be deployed, but it is appealing in its awkward unfamiliarity. It speaks to friendship, and to what Leela calls 'imperfect, inorganic relationships, something that has no final form, something you do not inherit – a commitment to making unfinished'. The commitment to unfinishing is particularly powerful. It thinks past the fixities of reciprocity or comradeship or other transactionalist modes of being together to something more imaginatively collaborative, a disordering that permits a universe of possible relations, of ways of being together that do not require repetitions of the world as it is.

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3 Judith Butler, Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?, A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies, 13.1 2002, p14.

One sparkling winter day we pulled into the parking lot of the Stein Valley Nlaka'pamux Heritage Park just outside of Lytton, BC, and weren't at all surprised to see no one else there. The park is gigantic – more than 1000 sq/km in total – with 150 km of hiking trails through a protected watershed that is of intense spiritual, cultural and material importance to the Nlaka'pamux people.

The park is not all that easy to get to. The Stein Valley was the site of some pitched battles in the 1980s and 90s over proposed logging, but the correct side won, and now the park is managed via the Stein Valley Co-operative Management Agreement between the Lytton First Nation and the Province of BC. To get there you have to drive a few hours north of Vancouver to the village of Lytton, cross the river on a little reaction ferry, then drive up a dirt road for 10km or so.

That road travels through Nlaka'pamux land scattered with occasional houses and small farms winding up to the park. Once you get to the entrance you drive a few kilometers in to the trailhead, and, should you be so inclined, it is ideal for some dusty-parking-lot-donuts in your rented vehicle.

That winter afternoon was especially calm and surprisingly warm. We had not seen any cars coming either way, had seen no one out in their yards or the road. The lot was deserted, quiet enough to hear the river pounding down below and the wind rustling the pine trees. As we were packing up for a day-hike, a giant, rough-looking dog came gently trotting up the road. He was in no hurry, but aimed straight for us. We were momentarily on guard, wondering if he was coming to defend his territory, but we relaxed almost immediately: this guy clearly had no malice in his mind. He strolled over for a quick head-scratch, then did his rounds, sniffing the truck, pissing on stuff, criss-crossing the lot seeing who had been through lately. We watched him for a minute, figured he must be from one of the nearby farms, then loaded up our packs and started down the trail.

Charmingly, the dog joined us. He was a powerfully-built, thick beast. Probably 140 pounds, with a rough white coat that was dirty and full of brambles, but he was still startlingly handsome. He joined us just like any companion, walking with us on the trail, occasionally stopping

or running ahead to do his own thing, but basically just joining in. We hiked for a couple of hours in one direction, mostly tracing the river, but periodically dipping into the forest, or traversing a bluff. The park was as spectacular as everyone says, with no one around at all, except our new dog friend.

When we stopped for a rest, our companion wandered around the river's edge, drinking out of little pools here and there, then came and flopped down beside us. We shared our snack with him: he was definitely interested in the salmon jerky, but not overly so. He liked the almonds and the granola bar too, but didn't seem all that hungry, and definitely was not begging. This dog had a wholly unfamiliar vibe – he wasn't obsequious or clingy or desperate for attention/approval/food. He wasn't really any of the typical dog-things. He was just there, hanging out. After a while we turned around and retraced our steps back to the car with our companion strolling along peacefully. The whole time we could barely contain our delight.

When we got to the vehicle, we weren't really sure how to proceed. We opened the trunk of the car to see if he wanted a ride somewhere, but he sneered at that. After some fussing around we decided to just leave. As we drove out, the dog ran behind, beside and in front of the car, happily marking us. At some point, maybe a mile or two out, he just peeled off without a word and jogged into the bush.

We were captivated. We talked about it for days after, always wondering what the dog was thinking: was he protecting us from bears? Was he a guide? Did he just want someone to go for a walk with? The experience continues to baffle us and confound easy analysis – it was a wholly singular kind of relationship for us, one not really repeated before or since. The only thing we sort of settled on is that he felt like a friend, like he had happily agreed to a relationship without bribe or threat, obligation or transaction.

We have no conceptual apparatus or names easily available to describe that experience, and we mourn that lack while celebrating what the absence makes available. How can we think of that absence as something other than poverty? Can we simultaneously name and not name that as friendship?

When Leela says friendship is a commitment to being unfinished "which is not to say that friendship is in itself undefinable or friendship is in itself something vague" that opens up the terrain for us. We mostly know how to interact with animals. There is a pretty standard palette of human/animal relationships available to most humans. We hunt, fear, goggle at wild animals. Breed, nurture, raise, eat, stare at captives. Care for, obsess and dote on pets. When an animal does not adhere to those categories it reorders our commitments and maybe offers something of a horizon. If we can stay there and let our animal relationships – as much as our relationships with humans and the rest of the more-than-human world stay unfinished, to 'think the absence of the name as something other than a privation', to let our relations be incomplete, then maybe that opens up ways that remake being-together.