

Birgit Hofstätter

## Making kin, or: The art of kindness and why there is nothing romantic about it



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*This text is based on my contribution "Joys of Aunt\*hood" to the workshop "Make Kin Not Babies – Discussing queer-feminist, non-natalist perspectives and pro-kin utopias, and their STS implications," STS Conference 2016. I dedicate it to Fanni Gerlach, kindness in person, an artist of making kin.*

Prologue: There is nothing wrong with wanting and having children, I have to begin with. Maybe these words raise the exact same red flag I wanted to avoid. These words have to be said, though, because this reflection is based on the situation of not having children, be it intentionally or incidentally, and being fine with it. In my experience, being fine with not having children is often taken as an offence by parents, as if I considered my personal state superior to theirs. Being also a vegetarian and a queer feminist, I am used to this pattern of people being offended because I do something differently as a matter of principle. I am no missionary, though. I am a champion of diversity, as long as everyone gets their share to flourish. When I was younger, I used to generalise my love for children. Now I have to admit: Some kids I do love dearly, others I prefer to keep a distance to. With some of them I just do not click. And I do not want to be judged for that, just as I do not judge others in their urge to procreate through children. There should be children brought to this world, for sure, and they should be wanted, loved and cared for. That is just something I have not been able to do – at least as far as my life has taken me – and I want that to be accepted. This is all to say as a preface.

Being without children, maybe even additionally to being without a partner – the classic archetype of an 'old spinster' – is a marginalised state of existence in our society as it contradicts the hegemonic sentiment of an ideal life, not only in Western cultures. Being without a partner (in whatever sexual constellation) and not having children is reason enough to raise suspicion. The urge to procreate through children, however, may not be as innate as stories coming e.g. from Hollywood's dream factories would lead us to

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1 I use \* to indicate that gender is something fluid and that there are more than two distinct genders but that most languages – including English and German – have not yet developed a way to express this. The asterisk is to constantly remind us to think beyond male and female.

believe. Most recently, mothers (and less scandalously debated fathers) have come out with confessions of regretting to have children in the first place (cf. e.g. study by Orna Donath 2016). On the other hand, being shamelessly without children is often considered egotistic and antisocial: Who will do the work when there are so many old and frail who did not care to procreate? Who will be there to pay taxes for financing retirement pensions? Who gives you the right to enjoy the benefits of a childless life while others have to organise their daily routines, their finances around the safety and future of their offspring? Partly, I have heard these questions/accusations of egotism in debates with 'pronatalists' and 'non-pronatalists' ever since one of my best friends in high school insisted – already at the age of 15 – that he would never have children, that it would be careless to expose children to the world as it is. I have witnessed and participated in many of such conversations, been on one or the other side of the issue, wanted children myself badly until I figured that maybe this is just something I had learned to want. However, and this is disturbing, these questions and accusations started to emerge in my inner dialogues as a by-product of the feeling of shame I have developed throughout the years while watching many of my peers stirring their lives towards the bourgeois family ideal. Because I myself seemed to 'fail' in 'finding the right partner' for that.

As a queer-feminist single with academic background, living in a deeply rural area in an environment where like-minded people are not exactly to be found around the corner, the question of how to connect to others, how to establish nurturing and persistent relationships, is pervading my everyday life. Yet it is not only an essential question to people who do not have children of their own (with or without partners). Kinship – regardless of existing blood ties with succeeding generations – is an essential question of resilience and well being, a question even of health and healthcare (cf. Campling 2013). It is also a question we have to ask in regard to responsible and sustainable existence on this planet, as Donna Haraway points out in her text "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin" (2015).

This text is a reflection on how kinship develops out of KINDness, caring for and taking care of others (which explores into the aspect of health and resilience). I find the term "aunt\*hood" or "uncle\*hood" useful for expressing this kind of kinship because this form of relation seems less hierarchical than parenthood, although it comprises the aspect of taking on responsibility for someone. In some societies in certain periods (particularly unwed) friends were adopted to families by calling them "aunt" or "uncle". I remember my grandmother having such friends my mother would introduce to me as "aunt". As an aunt\* to my oldest brother's children I am experiencing 'biological' aunt\*hood and compare this to other, similarly structured relationships I have observed and experienced throughout my life so far. In this aspect, I will repeatedly touch Donna Haraway's aforementioned text, particularly her calling "to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can

replenish refuge. Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge” (p. 160). To me, being an aunt\* also means to provide refuge: for my nephews\* and nieces\* when they seek it from their parents in times of disagreement, or in cases when their parents are not available at all, but also for those human and non-human beings who literally had to leave their home (or never had one in the first place). Still, with all the responsibilities dedicated aunt\*hood bears, this state of kinship seems to offer more space for the individuals involved than this society’s demands on parenthood would allow. Maybe this is also one of the reasons some people find themselves unfit to have children themselves. We have come to burden parenthood with way too high expectations and have created a culture of judging parental skills by which one can easily feel overwhelmed and insecure. In contrast, I feel that you practically cannot fail as an aunt\*. Being an aunt\* means to put forth one’s hand, not to impose oneself on another. It is an offer of kindness.

My parents have a – you may call it pathological – urge care for other people. This is where I found strong models for the kind of kinship I am about to describe. They both had respective jobs: My mum was a nurse and my dad first was a child care worker in a children’s home, later a manager of a boarding house, and a social worker in an assisted living facility for chronically ill psychiatric patients. My parents were always hosting and caring within and outside their jobs. One of my first childhood friends was Ronny, child of Czech refugees my parents helped through the first struggles after arriving in Austria, including Ronny’s birth. Another one was Franklin.<sup>2</sup> When his mother was on prison leave to see him they spent the weekends with us. Christian moved in when I was in kindergarten. As a baby whose parents were not able to take care of, he was brought to the children’s home in our village. When his psychological parent among the staff left the institution, he became my foster brother for quite some years. Only shortly after he moved out, my parents started to take care of a young couple who fled Hungary with their two small children before the fall of the Iron Curtain. My parents helped them through the transition from Austria to Canada. Suzanne and Judith were like siblings to me and we stayed pen pals after they left. In turn, they later supported me emotionally when I spent not-so-happy nine months as au pair in suburban Toronto. After that, my parents took care of a Russian family and a young Bulgarian mother who lost her husband in a terrible car accident. After my parents divorced, my dad started mentoring young Iranian refugees, two of them alternately stayed with him for a while. My mother, in turn, started to work in a palliative care unit – probably the job where she felt most useful and her care appreciated. Even now that they both have retired, my parents are still very active in taking care of others.

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<sup>2</sup> Name changed

Needless to say that taking care has also become part of who I consider myself to be. I am the oldest of four kids, in our younger days kind of a third parent to my siblings, and with my parents as role models, I could not help but become a care-taking-kind of person myself. Most recently I have come to take a critical look at this trait, though, and to realise how my own expectations of effective care-taking repeatedly takes me to the edges of my personal resources. Currently, 14-year old Mohammad from Syria is living with me and my dad, hoping that his parents will be able to follow from war-stricken suburban Damascus to reunite with him. Similarly, 30-year old Samsur from Afghanistan has moved in with us after a year of being a frequent visitor to our home, helping my dad with the garden and being highly appreciated in the local community service. The gentle person he is, he manages to connect even with individuals who have been reluctant to converse with refugees in the first place. He very organically has grown part of our family. Yet, it also works the other way around: In our most recent work with refugees, some overheard me calling my dad "Papa" and started to call him "Papa", too. One day, 10-year old Faisal from a Syrian family came up to me and claimed, that my dad was his "Opa" (his grandpa). In all these cases some kind of mutual adoption into each other's families seems to have taken place.

To make it clear: These relationships are not automatically always friendships (in most cases they are not), nor do they have to be particularly intimate. Just like 'biological' family relations are hardly ever always dearly and without frictions. On the contrary, some of them are quite challenging – Donna Haraway points out that neither "Make Kin" nor "Not Babies" are easy to accomplish but that "they both demand our best emotional, intellectual, artistic, and political creativity, individually and collectively, across ideological and regional differences, among other differences" (p. 164). Throughout our lives, we develop different languages, hold different views on the world – even among us 'biological' siblings as we have grown older. It is the feeling of responsibility for another being and a feeling of emotional connection that is the core of this kinship. It is kindness – the ability to recognise someone as kin, as of the same kind (cf. Campling 2013). Committing to these relationships can be exhausting and full of contradictions. When my dad started to take care of another Afghan family who came to our village, the process of connecting was particularly difficult and full of backlashes. It seemed that only part of the family was capable of opening themselves to this new place and its people. For instance, only the very young and one of the older sons would respond to me when greeting and talking to them. I knew that my offering kindness was undesired when another one of the older sons was sitting at our lunch table and would not respond – not even look me in the eyes – when I asked him if he wanted coffee. My attempt of kindness remained unacknowledged and at this point it is hard not to feel offended. I feel humbled by this experience because for the first time I consciously felt my racist

and colonial heritage. I had to take back the imaginary hand I had put forth and accept that making kin is not a one-way process.

As a white, female raised, queer feminist I think I also have to be critical of what lies underneath this ‘obsession’ with helping others, taking care of others, the urge to fix all the problems of one’s fellow beings. On the one hand, caring can be considered as taking on a superior position towards the being to care for, taking control and establishing a hierarchical relationship. On the other hand, caring is connoted with femininity (equals downgrading) and with taking sacrifices – and there is nothing romantic about it. As I pointed out before: Caring can be exhausting, particularly if you pay too little attention to your personal limits. Both perspectives are little desirable, at least to me. Neither do I want to put myself in a superior position to those I care for, nor do I want to reproduce stereotypes of femininity. It takes another perspective on caring, a mindset that deconstructs hierarchies and makes caring a nurturing experience for both the giving and receiving part. Ideally there is no such binary at all. So to me, kinship on the basis of caring can only work by reciprocity: That something ‘comes back’, that the other side accepts and welcomes being cared for, that there is also care offered in return – maybe not from the very same individual and maybe not in the very same form. This is why kinship through caring requires a rather thickly woven network of beings who offer and accept. Kinship is supposed to nurture the parties involved, it is supposed to be transformative. So, even though many of the people we care for come and go in the course of our lives, and even though we have lost touch with many of them, there is an infinite connection, an impact we have had on each other. When I think of these encounters, I have this image of us being waves of some waterdrops that hit an ocean. On our ways across that ocean we meet other waves, changing each other’s amplitudes. Some waves are gentle, some shake us like tsunamis. And we carry the information of every single encounter with us, even when we drift apart and go different directions.

Epilogue: As I revise this text for publication, I am in a sentimental mood, coming from the funeral of a person who I just now realise was the perfect model of an aunt\* as I have described in this text. In my view, she was personified kindness, caring and open hearted to whoever came her way, without putting herself in a superior position, forcing herself on those supposedly in need. As an anxious child I felt safe with her, and whenever I met her in my adult life I could still feel this calming effect on me even though we were never as close again. At the funeral, words of how much she would be missed not only by her huge ‘biological’ family but also by the whole community hardly ever felt so true than with her. She did have children – plenty of them – but she still had so much to give, particularly to disadvantaged people like refugees and children who came from troubled families. Her example proves that no matter how extensive ‘biological’ kinship reaches, whether single, childless or quite the opposite: Making kin as truly connecting with another individual is vital and probably the only way humanity (as in humanness)

can survive these times, now that we become aware of the limitedness of this planet's resources. Kindness might be the only act preventing us from turning against each other just as Jane Goodall's chimpanzees in their fight for some bananas (cf. Campling 2013).

## References

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