

## INTRODUCTION

## Imaginative kin-making: deconstructing the family, writing entanglements

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It was 1972 when Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in the *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, critically interpreted the nuclear family as a site of both psychic and societal control, challenging traditional notions about natal and marital bonds, and positing their rootedness in power dynamics rather than in, or at least in addition to, genuine connection. They argued that the household unit primarily served as a mechanism of repression, restricting desire and promoting conformity within capitalist structures. Advocating for a re-envisioning of longing and desire that transcended the confines of familial ties, they claimed the possibility of more fluid and liberated relations able to resist the normative strictures imposed by society, and ultimately pushed for a radical rethinking of affective relationships beyond the limitations of the biological family model.

Philosophical and psychoanalytic critiques represented the vanguards of a vast and more general movement that enlarged the scope and depth of the deconstruction of the nuclear family, since all the diverse realities of domestic life found, at the intersection of gender, class, race, and coloniality, a specific angle of urgent, mandatory reconsideration.

Feminist critical theory offered a profound critique of the genealogical mould by highlighting how traditional family structures reinforced patriarchal norms and gender inequality. Also within this framework, the nuclear family was seen as an ideological construct. In its modern restricted version, it constituted a microcosm of power dynamics where women were oppressed and still systematically burdened with the weight of domestic duties and child-rearing responsibilities, thereby limiting their opportunities for autonomy and self-realization. By challenging the notion of naturalness of the patriarchal paradigm, feminists promoted a

more inclusive understanding of family, capable of recognizing the importance of shared responsibilities, emotional exchange, and reciprocal respect.

In queer reconfigurations of family conventions, the aim has been to more radically discuss the heteronormative and binary structures regulating marriage and procreation. Since the traditional scheme of cisgender, heterosexual parents giving birth to a child through the fulfilment of conjugal duties has been central to definitions of parenthood for centuries, the principal aim in the (usually Western) new families was to positively affirm the importance of emotional bonds over blood ties (Zottola, Balirano, Mackenzie 2024), leading to a much more variegated tapestry of kin systems. Same-sex and single-parents who have children through surrogacy or other reproductive practices were just a possibility among others. The concept of “families of choice” (Weston 1992) had provided an efficacious counter-narrative to the traditional family model, highlighting how diverse relationships, including friendships, communal living, and queer partnerships, could offer profound support systems beyond the imperatives of heteronormativity. In this context, a special political emphasis continued to characterize the positions of thinkers like Judith Butler (2022) who argued that the nuclear family, as a dominant institution, reinforced social hierarchies and contributed to perpetuate neo-liberal capitalist formations that prioritized individualism and competition over communal well-being. This critique aligned with other radical positions that altogether called for the abolition of the nuclear family due to its complicity in systems of inequality, oppression, and economic exploitation (Lewis, 2019, 2022; O’Brien 2023), and with the exhortation to embrace alternative forms of more free and inclusive practices of connection such as polyamory (Vassallo 2018).

In another direction, postcolonial criticism saw the matter under specific historical circumstances highlighting how colonial powers often dismantled indigenous kinship structures and imposed Western family models. The multifaceted kinship systems that existed in many tribal cultures tended to emphasize interconnectedness and community, with networks that included extended family members, clan systems, and relationships with the land and ancestors. These patterns often prioritized collective wellbeing and support, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity. In many indigenous societies, kinship was not solely based on biological relationships but was broader, encompassing social, spiritual, and environmental connections. The colonial construct of the nuclear family was on the contrary instrumental in reinforcing individualism and capitalistic modes of production and consumption, often leading to feelings of isolation and disconnection in communities that previously relied on collective ties and shared responsibilities (Whyte 2020). Also in this context, then, the critique to the Western imposition of the strictly biological model emphasized the necessity to move towards alternative family patterns, including indigenous frameworks, in order to recuperate a wider sense of community and a more diffused ecological responsibility.

Ecological responsibility has indeed been at the very core of more recent family and kin redefinitions. This time, it was the ecocritical and post-anthropocentric turn that needed to reconceive ties and forms of caring in the living world upon completely different foundations.

Val Plumwood, in her seminal *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), introducing the concept of ‘the relational self’ had already inaugurated a new ontology based on the surmounting of the opposition between self and other or the dualism between nature and culture and had embraced the view of the living universe as tightly interconnected. Carolyn Merchant (2005), working for her part on the same intersections of ethics, ecology, and feminism, proposed the category of ‘partnership ethics’ to address the necessity of establishing mutually supportive and egalitarian relationships among humans, as well as between humans and the natural world. Likewise, Rosi Braidotti (2013), challenging the notion that only biology determines protection and responsibility, argued for the value of new relational ontologies, more apt, in the context of ecological crises, to create networks of concern and cooperative relationships within the web of life.

Within New Materialism, Stacy Alaimo propounded a novel materialist sense of the human as perpetually interconnected with the “flows of substances and the natural agencies of the planet” (Alaimo 2014, 187) defining this continuous mesh of bodies and elements as “trans-corporeality.” Serpil Oppermann (2016) coined the expression “participatory universe” to similarly address not only the deep connections between people and environments, but also the importance of collaboration and active engagement in the processes of understanding and shaping the world, advocating for a more integrated and holistic approach to knowledge and community dynamics.

Donna Haraway (2016, 2018) too, in devising the category of the Chthulucene posited a dimension of symbiotic interdependence among the various forms of existence which, far from prioritizing humans as the dominant presence on Earth, tended to promote multispecies and interspecies solidarities. Disengaging from human exceptionalism, the American philosopher called for a thorough reconsideration of the ties of kinship as a means to confront the thorny question of survival for a planet already fast travelling towards its demographic and environmental collapse. She addressed the question from a critical post-human and post-anthropocentric stance, reminding us of the need to reintroduce concern about Earth at every scale, and to fight against the current mass extinction of species of life from the complex perspective of both “the Born and the Disappeared” (Haraway 2018, 69). She meant, by this, to keep together the apparently opposed necessities of guaranteeing reproductive justice and safeness for peoples subjected to genocides, forced sterilizations, missing generations and, at the same time, of finding ways of reversing the general world population growth.

Despite our preoccupations with low natal trends here in the West, it is undeniable that overpopulation in global terms represents a critical obstacle to sustainability, since an

unchecked human proliferation is bound to accelerate resource depletion and environmental degradation. Considering that human numbers are almost certain to reach about 10,5 billion people by the end of the century and that this figure represents an almost 6 billion-person increase from just 1950 to 2100,<sup>1</sup> with hugely unequal consequences for the poor and the rich, and even worse effects for nonhumans, we are obliged to ask, with Haraway, how we can create enduring relationships without necessarily ‘making more babies’.

“I propose ‘Make Kin Not Babies!’ Making—and recognizing—kin is perhaps the hardest and most urgent part.” (Haraway 2016, 102)

Introducing the term *oddkin*, Haraway has posed the question of how to increase human and multispecies well-being while radically reducing human impact and beginning to repair damaged life clusters and spaces across the planet. Since the intersection between reproductive justice and environmental concerns implies our capacity to reverse spoliative policies of natural resources and habitats, in a pro-active sense, we have espoused the request for a deeply renovated understanding of the kin issue, and advocate for a relational solidarity able to transcend biological ties and strictly genealogical bonds. In this issue of *From the European South*, titled *Imaginative Kin-Making: Narrating Alternative Forms of Kinship in Survival Literature and Fiction*, the intention has been to verify how in stories about struggle and survival in compromised environments and/or conditions of socio-political unrest, the lines of solidarities adopted to face the various crises reflect and substantially advance the idea of a kinship not necessarily modelled on natal kin and the biological family. The intention was to spot, in narration, thematic and formal frameworks for understanding how alternative kinship structures and new forms of *oddkin* can respond to and challenge both social injustices and environmental crises. The hope is that rethinking literature in this way may offer new possibilities for collective ecological responsibility and social justice, urging a movement towards more inclusive, sustainable futures.

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Rethinking literature is precisely what the opening article of the issue does, with Francesca Guidotti’s re-reading of Shakespeare’s *Henry V* in a post-human perspective. The interesting take on the Shakespearean text looks at the imaginary mother figures in the play as fostering and offering, to the embattled men, the cultivation of alter-communities, or possible connections with beings ‘worthy of care’ in a kinship that is also, through the well-known Shakespearean word-play, kindness. In the face of conflict, a way to survival appears then to

be the inclusive space of 'symbiogenetic kinship', achievable only through alternative figurations of motherhood.

From this first glance into the possibilities of the literary text to open up and, in a sense, reassemble itself into constant re-readings, we move from the early-modern to contemporary timeframes, with Rossella Ciocca's study of Arundhati Roy's 2017 novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Here, too, motherhood weaves the fabric of the text, this time specifically in its critical implications for the ecological and queer perspectives on kinships and alter-families. Roy's text emerges, through Ciocca's analysis, as a space not only for experimenting alternative communities at the intersection of gender, race, caste, and religion, but also for elaborating different coping strategies in the face of trauma, ultimately exploring the possibilities within queer, more-than-human and life-death relational ontologies.

Queer kinships and alternative human and more-than-human ecologies, in turn, intersect with diasporic community-building in Marta Cariello's analysis of Zayn Joukhadar's novel *The Thirty Names of Night* (2021). Here, again, motherhood is threaded through the storyline, this time in the ghostly presence of a dead mother, inviting the reader to engage with the past, memory, and the possibilities of other narratives as means of (relational) survival. The ecologies of alternative kin allow in this case a re-reading of temporalities and of personal and collective history.

The ecological element of alternative relationalities emerges in Giuseppe De Riso's article, shifting here from the family and its critique to transcend not only genetic but also anthropocentric lineages and human-nature-technology relations. *The Overstory* (2018) by Richard Powers is analyzed by De Riso as raising, through its protagonists' individual and unique connections to trees, crucial questions on environmental and futuristic horizons, in "the kind of speculative fabulation made of string figures and *soin de ficelle* that Haraway sees as consonant with the Chthulucene" (infra, p. 54).

Speculative fiction is also at the center of Lucio De Capitani's contribution, which proposes a study of Cherie Dimaline's *Marrow Thieves* series (2017-2021) and N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017) as interweaving post-apocalyptic settings with climate (in)justice and racial inequalities. Working respectively within Indigenous and African-American science fiction, the two authors, as De Capitani observes, not only expose social and racial inequalities through constructing dystopian universes, but also offer visions of possible ways to family abolition, or alternatives to the hegemonic institution of the family and the hierarchies and uneven power relations at its core.

We find Cherie Dimaline at the center of Alice Salion's article as well, this time with a reading of the Métis authors' short story entitled "Legends are made, not born" (2016). Looking specifically at Dimaline's elaboration of *wâhkôhtowin*, or the Indigenous principle of extended kinship, Salion frames Dimaline's work in Indigenous futurism, and its use of storytelling to

reclaim spaces of an ‘unmodifiable past’. In this light, Cherie Dimaline’s story can be read as a narrative of bonds of responsibility and preservation of collective memory, also entangled with the exploration of *two-spiritness*, with a “made-and-not-born family” at the center of the story, embodying “the relational potential of a dystopian migratory future that re-weaves the threads of ancient epistemologies essential to Indigenous survival” (infra, p. 82).

Chiara Xausa and Arianna Preite’s contribution remains within the realm of science fiction and the disruption of genetic-bound families, reading the biopolitics of reproduction and motherhood through Tlotlo Tsamaase’s 2024 novel, *Womb City*. A futuristic Botswana serves here as the backdrop to fabulations of AI-controlled and human-monitored artificial wombs, in turn serving as cue for a wider reflection on the feminist debate on reproductive rights, the family as instrument of oppression, and the intersections therein of gender, race, and biotechnologies.

The issue closes with an interview with visual theater author and performer Marta Cuscunà. Rossella Menna engages in a conversation with Cuscunà on her 2021 piece *Earthbound*, declaredly inspired by Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble*. The material aspect of stage performance emerges here as key to the translation of the philosophical depth of Haraway’s “The Camille Stories” (Haraway 2016) and the concept and practice of compost we are invited to ‘stay with’. The interview offers insights into the process of writing and staging such complex figurations, but also explores Haraway’s ramifications, her influence, and the politics and potency of the body, its matter, its biology and technology, as human, more-than-human, other-than-human; always intimately interconnected, perhaps able to perform some meaning of this, our common *response-ability*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/>, or <https://ourworldindata.org>.

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