



# Kin Are the People Who Still Pick Up the Phone: An Essay on the Social Constructions of Family, Kin, and Self

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## ABSTRACT

In this short creative nonfiction piece, author Casey Anne Brimmer discusses their understanding of kinship as a matter of chosen family that relies on covenants—spoken and unspoken—to built kinship ties. Here, the author speaks to their experience of being isolated from kin by circumstances and how, to them, kin are the people who pick up the phone even after years of not talking to one another.

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Kin is a social construct that exists because of communities of people. Its meaning changes across time and space and, in order to exist as a concept, kin requires other people and institutions to create it. I started this assignment the first week that readings were due. I wanted to be ahead, be on time. I wanted to not let ADHD cause absurd anxiety because I was behind. For a while there, I was ahead and on time, but then, last week as I was trying to write about found family in the queer community as kin, and intergenerational connections based in both gusto to change the world and in shared or similar trauma, life happened—the legal dissolution of marriage happened.

As I write, I feel compelled to note that I draw distinctions between family and kinfolk even while I remain unsure of what it truly means to be kin. I consider how the adage “blood is thicker than water” is used to put focus on blood relations over those outside of one’s genetic connections. But, being who I am, I also know that “blood is thicker than water” is not the only version of the quotation. Rather, I ascribe my beliefs to the version which states *the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb*. Meaning that the promises and commitments, the covenants you make with others are thicker—stronger—than being born to a bloodline. One is chosen, the other is what it is. When the saying is shortened, the meaning is flipped, and it is often used to compel an individual to do as their “family” wants them to. The cultural expectations here in the U.S. seem to focus on what is best for one’s “family” regardless of what is best for the person in question. This is how I was raised, sacrificing myself for blood ties who often chose to honor covenants outside of the womb over me. Considering this, it doesn’t seem all that strange that I have spent fifteen years trying to find answers to the question: what is family? What is kin? Do we all get to have these or only some of us? When I was married in 2015, he asked me to sacrifice blood ties for that marriage: a marriage that I wanted but also struggled with at the same time.

My whole life, marriage has been described as an institution upheld by the state, sanctified by the Church, and as an institution being destroyed by lovers of those who share their gender; being destroyed by queers, kinksters, the polyamorous: by anyone who loves too much for only two people to hold. Yet, marriage was not “being destroyed” by the straight folks on marriage number nine, or by the people who somehow still think it’s okay to marry young girls off to older men. I was raised in a “do anything for family or die trying” mentality but I’ve been getting contradictory messages about what makes a family since I can remember.

While I had hoped my marriage would help me to solidify some ties to someone, it moved me both physically and metaphorically away from the bloodlines I was taught mattered more than anything, despite not being a priority for anyone with whom I shared a bloodline. Howard Zinn wrote the following in his people’s history of the United States:

Nations are not communities and never have been, The history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interest (sometimes exploding, most often repressed) between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex. And in such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people, as Albert Camus suggested, not to be on the side of the executioners.<sup>1</sup>

This idea that nations are not communities is something which I take a step further as I am a strong believer that institutions are not communities any more than nations are. As such, if institutions are not communities, they cannot be families.

The first marriage I watched dissolve was my parents’. There was violence and aggression, and, on more than one occasion, cops were called and I hid behind boxes in the attic or beneath the queen sized bed in my mother’s room. Through witnessing a series of indiscretions, or perhaps a comedy of errors, my child self knew that there was turbulence in the home but I never expected to not see my father for six months, or that when I saw him again he’d be marrying one of the women it felt like he had left my mother, and us kids, for. It would not be the last time he would choose covenants made with that woman over his children, despite demanding loyalty to the paraphrase “blood is thicker than water.”

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove, *A People’s History of the United States* (Harper, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2017), 10.

Yet it was a “blood family” member burying the chaos of emotions, which I could not understand, in the words: “good little girls keep quiet.” My family taught me that it was my job to be a good little girl, a quiet young lady, and yet it was a job my body, mind, body—mind, were not built for. I could see contradictions in the messages, but I couldn’t put into words why I was confused. Good little girls keep quiet anyway, so I did not have the space or courage to challenge the doctrine of either matrilineal or patrilineal lines.

I was a child who was never supposed to exist, and I have known this for decades. My family would not let me forget. When my family learned that I was queer, blows landed against my body far more than I landed within reach of safe touch, affirming words, small acts of kindness. I was desperate for connection, for family, for more than family. I was desperate for kinfolk who might love me even as I struggled to love myself.

That’s how the Church got to me. I was an isolated teen who spent time writing online trying to earn money for food that ought to have been supplied to me on equal footing as my siblings, and for necessities like menstruation products that other household members had open access to. I knew I did not belong at home and I was an outcast at school—socially awkward and sensory overwhelmed. When I was recruited to attend a church by a woman on the internet, I went. She offered me the love of a god and church—family that she and others in that church would snatch away when I shared a message of Love, affirmation, and community with the queer kids at school that I tried hard not to be. Their perspective was that of the Assemblies of God Church, and it remains so today: “in light of biblical revelation, that the growing cultural acceptance of homosexual identity and behavior (male and female), same-sex marriage, and efforts to change one’s biological sexual identity are all symptomatic of a broader spiritual disorder that threatens the family, the government, and the church”.<sup>2</sup> I tried to be less queer, I tried to be straighter. I didn’t want to lose my found “family”, but conversion therapy doesn’t work. Try as I did to pray the gay away, I could not.

When my church “family” was pulled from my loose grasp on its edge, one thing would lead to another and I would be chosen by people who I did not want to let love me because I feared for their souls if I let them affirm me in who I was then. These people would become my moms. In undergrad I felt community with my classmates, I felt bonded to these siblings through our shared experiences in classes and through the vulnerabilities of existing isolated in a room full of people. I pulled away from my family of origin because I was learning I deserved more than last place if I was expected to give my all at a moment’s notice to make something easier for someone else.

2015 arrived and I ended up with a lover who was suddenly going to be my husband. I thought to myself, *I will have a family. We will covenant to be each other’s love and support.* I was convinced that marriage must be what made a family—when my mother and father divorced the family fell apart and I was at risk. When my dad married my stepmother, he chose her repeatedly over his children. When my brother married his first wife, we all chose to put her child under our protection. Family must be something we choose and there was this person choosing me.

Yet it was frowned upon by my spouse to call my parents, siblings, or cousins. I barely spoke to anyone at school or at “home.” I worked 40 hours a week on top of grad school, but I wasn’t doing enough. I thought being married would be a community with my partner and that that community would be family. That’s not how it went. I was predisposed to believe what I was experiencing was love and, though I briefly studied gender-based violence in undergrad, I had never been taught that Love Shouldn’t Hurt.

It took two and a half years for me to realize that the familial “love” I had learned from my blood family, and the “love” I was being shown at “home” with my husband, wasn’t actually “normal” in that it wasn’t really love at all. It turns out that patterns of “controlling behaviors that one partner uses to get power over the other”<sup>3</sup> can be defined as domestic abuse and may include patterns of physical, emotional, financial, spiritual, and sexual violence/manipulation and/or threats thereof. I had been isolated for nearly 3 years by the time I put words to what was happening. I couldn’t reach out to anyone. I couldn’t leave. Where would I go?

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2 “Homosexuality, Marriage, and Sexual Identity,” Assemblies of God (USA) Official Web Site | Homosexuality, Marriage, and Sexual Identity, 2014, <https://ag.org/beliefs/position-papers/homosexuality-marriage-and-sexual-identity>.

3 “Love Should Not Hurt.” Love Shouldn’t Hurt. Accessed February 23, 2022. <https://www.loveshouldnothurt.com/>.

So my husband moved with me to the next state/school and I would stay with him for almost another year. I was drowning in schoolwork and working full time to make sure everyone ate and that everything was paid for. Meanwhile, my husband coerced me into an open marriage, then he moved his partner into the home I paid for, feeding him the food I bought, and stranding me to the floor or the couch. On some occasions, I slept in my car while they took my bed. I had made a covenant and I had to stay. I couldn't leave. Where would I go?

Freedom started with a car ride in March 2020. I drove two hours to get a dog from a farm because the pandemic was destroying my brain. I was more trapped than ever, more isolated, and increasingly afraid of what might happen. Archie came home that day and sending a picture of my new puppy to a mom I had barely spoken to in years opened communication. Every time we talked I deleted the conversations to protect myself. I wasn't ready. Then my husband's boyfriend visiting a few times a week turned into "This is his home now."

Suddenly I was ready. It wasn't an end to my experiences. It was an end to me allowing "family" to determine I didn't deserve basic human decency and support from the person who called himself my "partner." When I reclaimed my life, it started with my bedroom and a phone call, long delayed out of fear. They say that when life gets wild you find out who your friends are. In my experience, you find out who your kin is.

The first months of the COVID-19 pandemic meant hiding bruises from the camera on Zoom, it meant doing therapy—— paid for by an adoptive mom——in my car, as I worked to gather the courage to leave. It meant taking every damn thing with me when I left because he refused to leave himself. It also meant giving up my hopes of buying the house I had put almost three grand down on and it meant forfeiting the money to my landlord. But kin meant I could call my best friend as I drove 14 hours straight back to Massachusetts as I rapidly approached exhaustion to the point of hallucination, after being awake 20 hours on three hours of sleep.

It meant that I hid my things in a storage shed, the second key safe with a friend no one knew existed, and to this day she has the emergency documentation I keep set aside—— not because I am still in danger, but because I never want to feel trapped again. Nearly a full two years later, my divorce decree came in while I worked on this assignment; my mind reeled, asking within myself if it was worth sharing this story when my mind could no longer focus on the piece of found family as kin. Yet the end of my "family"/marriage —— the ending of the dissolution of marriage as an institution in my mind ——meant truly realizing that "found family," the family of covenant without expectations of giving everything for nothing in return—— is my kin.

Kin is a social construct that in its very nature is performative. Judith Butler<sup>4</sup> defines performativity as "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names." Kin is created by the performance/ doing of actions which are coded as kinship-building, and that means building interpersonal/social relationships. Kin is not inherently blood nor marriage, nor living only for each other. I wrote this paper because I knew I would understand "kin" for myself differently at its conclusion than if I had focused solely on found family across time in the queer community between generations of elders who became elders at ever-younger ages and yet, that original paper still applies here.

In early October 2021 I drafted a letter to young queer people when I realized that at 29, days away from 30, I was, in some ways, an elder to younger generations of LGBTQ+ people. In that letter I stated:

The government abandons our people, and "family" may – and all too often, does – do the same. Sometimes calling it "love" for a god who made us this way, or for the person they are leaving in the night. Many of us were and are cared for and nurtured by strangers who know the feeling of being turned away from their [F]athers' tables, removed from their mothers' family lines. Separated from siblings who suddenly cannot connect.<sup>5</sup>

As I wrote that letter, I had to separate myself from the emotional realization that I still harbored self-hate learned from both my family of origin and the Assemblies of God Church

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4 Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. Routledge, 1993, 2.

5 Brimmer, C A. Letter to Young Queers. "Letter to Young Queers from a 29 Year Old Elder." Blacksburg, VA, September 4, 2021.

mentioned above which recruited me as a teenager. The major difference was that those who helped me to pick up my pieces when I felt shattered by my excommunication also helped me to learn that I don't have to know how to love myself to deserve love or to be loved by others.

Kin is who we make covenants deeper than blood with. Kinfolk are the people you call up after three, four, five, even six years and, while so much has happened, no time has passed. Kin is choosing to live in ways that honor ties between souls: ties that don't fall apart even when someone is hacking away at your very essence. Kin is what gives you the strength to put yourself back together, at least that is what kin is to me. Kin are the people who still pick up the phone.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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