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Donor siblings
Participating in each other's conception

Comment on SAHLINS, Marshall. 2013. *What kinship is—and is not.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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What kinship is—and is not (Sahlins 2013) is a gem of a book; a joy to read and a reminder of why I was enchanted by anthropology when I first encountered it. Ethnographic example tumbles after ethnographic example; many familiar, others less so, all attesting to the richness of the ethnographic record on that contested, albeit perennial, topic of kinship. This slim volume manages, with eloquence, to draw on (and draw out) kinship thinking and practices from every continent although, for this reader, more might have been said about the Euro in Euro-American. I say this not because I have an ethnographic interest in Europe (although I do), nor to suggest that somehow there ought to be a more "representative" set of examples. The ethnographies that Marshall Sahlins draws on, as he notes himself, are exemplary and he has, indeed, made judicious choices with which to exemplify his argument. I mention it because, as is frequently the case, the bundling together of diverse understandings, practices, and performances of kinship into the sheath of either Euro-American or Western runs the danger of skating over a rich ethnographic record and of sacrificing the specificities of kinship to an argument that needs a foil—a point to which I return below.

Sahlins argues with admirable and characteristic lucidity that kinship is "mutuality of being." This formulation has the added virtue of being intuitive. Kin participate in each other's lives: they "belong to one another . . . are parts of one another . . . are co-present in each other" (21). Furthermore, kin "partake of each other's suffering and joys . . . and feel the effects of each other's acts" (28). In a favorite idiom of people in the north of England, "kick one, and they all limp" (Edwards 2000).

Sahlins nails the folly of contrasting procreation with social construction and underlines the point that there is nothing inevitable about the kinship of procreation. "[K]inship is culture, all culture" (Sahlins 2013: 89), he concludes.

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"Begetters, begone" (5), he cries, in the face of Iñupiat kinship by naming. Some readers will be disappointed that his gaze falls predominantly on the birthing end of kinship-making. The terrain of conception, pregnancy, and birth has been travelled widely recently, especially by scholars of what has been dubbed the "new" kinship studies, some of whom have drawn both data and inspiration from burgeoning biomedical interventions in conception. The anthropological focus on assisted reproductive technology has been productive in unraveling the component parts of kinship in different parts of the world. It has also been criticized for skewing the anthropological focus on kinship by overdetermining conception and birth and overshadowing what happens in succession and at death (see, for example, Lambek 2011). Sahlins' thesis, however, does not preclude consideration of the life course and he does extend "mutuality of being" to the mutuality of death: kin also "die each other's deaths" (48). But significantly, for Sahlins, kinship does not begin with birth. Unlike many scholars of the "new" kinship studies, Sahlins remains firmly interested in and committed to the *system* of kinship which, for him, comprises "a manifold of intersubjective participations" or "a network of mutualities of being" (20). He writes beautifully of how parents are kin prior to the conception and birth of their children. Parents themselves participate in the existence of their own parents and siblings and thus "kinship is the *a priori* of birth rather than the sequitur" (68).

Back to the Euro I was longing to hear more about. Sahlins is not the only anthropologist to argue that it is only Euro-Americans who "understand themselves to be constructed upon—or in fundamental ways, against—some biological-corporeal substratum," as opposed, that is, to others who know that "kinship is already given in their flesh" (77). I want to interrogate this seeming peculiarity of Euro-American kinship, and I do so through a recently emerging kin figure—the "donor sibling." Donor siblings have appeared as significant kinship entities in the medium of assisted reproductive technology.

"Diblings," as they have been affectionately called, are persons who are related through having been conceived with gametes from the same donor but brought up in different families and by different parents. Genetically "half" brothers or sisters, donor siblings are a distinct and distinctive category of kin. They are not step-siblings, who in English kinship thinking are not genetically related to each other, nor are they the same kind of "half-sibling" forged though re-marriage and recombinant families. Donor siblings need not necessarily know their donor, yet claim kinship with each other through shared substance. They trace their relatedness through the woman who donated the ova used in their conception or the man who donated the sperm. The small amount of research and literature on donor siblings, and the large amount of commentary on the Internet and in policy fora, focuses more on sperm donation than egg donation and I shall do the same here.

In the United Kingdom, donor siblings have emerged as significant kinship figures for some "donor-conceived families"[1] in the context of an ideological shift in policy and practice towards more "openness" and "transparency" and, with

1. I use the kinship idioms in common currency, which also includes "donor-conceived siblings" (see the Nuffield Council on Bioethics Report 2013).

reference to "the family," an underscoring of the virtue of "honesty."[2] A move away from a preference for donor anonymity is occurring and this is being shaped and reinforced by changes in UK legislation.[3] There is a strong call, at present, for donor-conceived children to be told not only the means of their conception but also the identity of their donor.[4] These shifts and revisions in public discussion and policy have been augmented by the unprecedented means of sharing and disseminating information afforded by the Internet and new social media.[5] The Internet and more specifically "people finding sites" such as the Donor Sibling Registry in the United States and the Donor Conceived Register in the United Kingdom are enabling individuals conceived with gametes from the same anonymous donor to locate each other.[6] The unique code that was attached to each vial of semen in the sperm bank in the process of anonymising the donor can now be logged on a relevant internet site so family seekers can search for a match. In the words of sociologist Rosanna Hertz and psychotherapist Jane Mattes, "[i]n an ironic twist, the identification numbers that disassociated men from their gametes are being used to connect the children conceived from their gametes" (Hertz and Mattes 2011: 1135).

Interestingly, donor siblings, when found, also act as bridges between donor sibling families. It seems that a growing number of unrelated parents with children who are genetically related to each other are forming what some are calling "clans." These "clans" exist mostly on the Internet, but there are also reports and commentaries from members who describe "family reunions" and "clan get-togethers," and always in positive kinship terms.[7] The borrowing of this well-worn anthropological concept has a particular contemporary (even postmodern) twist. It combines, in pastiche, the ancestor in common and the family of choice, and blurs the boundaries of kinship and friendship. Drawing on interviews with parents of donor-

2. A recent and insightful PhD thesis from Maren Klotz (2012) tracks and compares the shifting parameters of privacy in the context of assisted reproductive technologies in Germany and the United Kingdom.

3. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (Disclosure of Donor Information) Regulations 2004, decreed that any person conceived as result of donated gametes after 01 April, 2005 be entitled to obtain identifying information about their donor when they reach the age of eighteen—thus abolishing the anonymous donation of sperm, eggs, and embryos.

4. See Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2013). *Donor conception: ethical aspects of information sharing*, available at: http://www.nuffieldbioethics.org/sites/default/files/Donor_conception_report_2013.

5. The Donor Sibling Registry (DSR) is a voluntary international register launched in 2000 and designed to facilitate contact between donor-conceived people and their parents, and donors and donor siblings. To date it has 39,499 registrants, and reports having connected 10,150 "half siblings (and/or donors) to each other." https://www.donorsiblingregsitery.com (accessed July 28, 2013).

6. http://www.donorconceivedregister.org.uk/

7. Hertz and Mattes (2011: 1130) describe these as "donor sib clans" and as "large groups composed of several smaller families" that offer "socioemotional ties" and support.

conceived children in the United Kingdom, Tabitha Freeman and colleagues at the Centre for Family Research in Cambridge write:

> Parents [of donor-conceived persons] commonly framed the relationships between members of donor sibling families in terms of 'family' and 'friendship': for example, by using phrases such as 'extended family', 'we are all now one big family', 'a family of close friends' and 'our small nuclear family is connected to a larger community'. Such references served to emphasize the intensity and endurance of these bonds. (Freeman et. al. 2009: 512).

Some social commentators are seeing in this a new and emergent family form:

> [D]onor-conceived individuals who are identifying and forging links with genetic kin are beginning to establish the parameters by which the shifting "latent web" of donor half-sibling linkages . . . becomes more firmly embedded as a new family form in the 21st century. (Blyth 2012: 724)

What might Sahlins' small and insightful treatise on kinship offer our understanding of this novel extension of "clanship" to loose and virtual associations of nuclear families, connected via one male genitor, and with a privileging of, and emphasis on, the relationship between "half-siblings"?

Before returning to Sahlins and what he has to say about siblings, allow me one more, rather long, quotation from a study which analyzed survey responses from 492 donor conceived people (between the ages of thirteen and forty) in the United States:

> [D]onor siblings are viewed by everyone as an opportunity to enlarge a family. Of course, in a sense it is not surprising that siblings should be viewed so positively in both types of household [lesbian-parent and heterosexual-parent families]. After all, these "siblings" do not and cannot compete for a mother's love since the offspring do not share the same mother. And all donor siblings have been equally "rejected" by the father who wants to remain anonymous. To be sure, siblings provide access to, and a glimpse at, paternal kin. But unlike sisters and brothers who grow up together, these siblings are "perfect"—related just to them (and not to their parents) and no immediate threat to parental love, resources, or time. Therefore, they are imagined—or already known—as being "cool", "fun" and "neat"; they are people who "understand them." (Nelson et al. in press, 2013)[8]

If we put aside for a moment the psychoanalytical take of the researchers on what drives parent-child relationships, and if we refrain from questioning the notion of "rejection," even in scare quotes, this example is remarkable for what it reveals about the ways in which donor siblings imagine and bring into being their kinship connections in terms that are resonant of friendship. Sjaak van der Geest reminds us that "[f]riendship seems voluntary and kinship ascribed" and comparatively "friendship appears to us as a relatively free attachment, which is admired and cherished universally because of its disinterested and untainted character" (2013: 51, 52): not too different, I would argue, from the way in which the "perfect"

8. One of the authors, Wendy Kramer, together with her donor-conceived son, founded and launched the DSR register in 2000.

sibling, untainted by the strictures and duties of filiation, is described above. We should keep in mind that only some donor siblings choose to find each other, make contact, and forge, in some cases, amicable and mutually enjoyable relationships; many do not. This is a kinship link that is both involuntary (given through the circumstances of one's conception) and entirely voluntary and which may or may not stand the test of time.

The same survey revealed how donor-conceived people and their parents are often more interested in donor siblings than they are in donors. As the quotation above suggests, the relatedness of siblings is perceived to be benign and poses less of a threat to donor-conceived families than the figure of the donor who has the potential of being an additional parental figure and of supplanting one of the parents. Siblings, in this kinship thinking, are related laterally and equally and, like friends, they are conceived of as the same age and the same generation. The fact that, in practice, and with the possibility of freezing sperm, donor siblings may differ considerably in age is beside the point. Siblingship already connotes a particular kind of amity that donor siblings not only seek but also perform. As anthropologists we can note that sibling relationships may be marked as much by antipathy and competition as amity and cooperation; or that the ways in which they are conducted and informed by gender, age, or ethnicity, for example, is not universally the same the world over, but that would not detract from the ideal writ large in the figure of the donor sibling. As Mac Marshall writes for Trukese kinship, "[c]reated sibling relationships are not only as good as natural ones, they are potentially better" (Marshall 1977: 649, cited in van der Geest 2013: 69). What better, then, than siblings who are both "created" *and* "natural"? While genetic relatedness acts as the impetus for making a connection (that is, genetics matters, not least as the idiom in which relatedness is apprehended), donor siblings are not merely biologically filiated. They are known, prior to any contact between them, to be familiar and to understand one another: they partake in each others' experience or, to borrow Victor Turner's phrase, "participate in one another's existence" (cited in Sahlins 2013: 22, cf. 68). But they are also "chosen."

Although evidence is scant, fewer donor-conceived people or their parents are interested in identifying donors or donor siblings than are and, in Britain, more parents choose not to tell their donor-conceived children the means of their conception than do (Appleby et al. 2012). My intention is not to reduce the many factors that shape the decisions that parents make about telling their children, or not, that they were conceived using donated gametes to "choice," but merely to flag that anthropologists have been interested in how families "by choice," intention, and will are created and maintained, as well, of course, as disrupted and ruptured.[9] It is not, I think, too far a stretch to see in the links that are being created and maintained between donor-conceived families in both the United States and the United Kingdom, what Sahlins calls a "network of mutualities of being." Where the limits of the network are and how stable or enduring it may be are ethnographic questions.

9. Kath Weston (1991), of course, wrote eloquently and persuasively about families "we choose" more than two decades ago; and, more recently, Marilyn Strathern (2005) has incisively, and with characteristic precision, unpacked and compared the legal entity of the "intending parent."

Sahlins reminds us that the Ku Waru people know that siblings are related as much through the food they share—food that comes from the same ancestral soil—as they are through being born of the same parents. The generative substance of *kopong* is transmitted in sweet potatoes and pork as well as in father's sperm and mother's milk. He quotes Francesca Merlan and Alan Rumsey: "In Western ideologies 'real' siblingship is determined entirely by prenatal influences: by the fact that the corporeal existence of each sibling began with an event of conception at which genetic substance was contributed by the same two individuals" (Sahlins 2013: 67). However, the way in which "Western kinship" acts here as foil to the ethnography of the "other" entails an assumption that we know, ethnographically, what constitutes kinship in the West. It belies Sahlins' own argument. As I noted above, he argues evocatively and convincingly that we need to pay attention to how parents are themselves already kin. Seeing "real" siblingship as only determined by prenatal influences takes parents out of context and treats them as abstract beings that procreate without pre-existing kinship identities and relationships. This is a move that elsewhere Sahlins warns against. The same device is there in the ethnographic example from To Pamona: "the ease with which children move from house to house reflects a notion of parentage rooted in nurturance and shared consumption rather than narrowly defined biological filiation . . . To Pamona parents and children see the recognition of parentage as emergent through time and effort" (Schrauwers 1999: 311, cited in Sahlins 2013: 3). Again the West and its presumed fixation with narrowly defined biological filiation acts as the foil which reveals the special characteristics, in this case, of To Pamona kinship. All well and good, but the foil requires us to ignore the complexity and diversity of kinships that fall under the rubric of the West.

The ethnographic record of Euro-American kinship, some of which includes (like my example here) the kinship reverberations of assisted reproductive technologies, belies a "narrowly defined biological filiation," even in the case of donor siblings who initially connect themselves through what they know as a genetic link. Donor conceived people also have parents who put in the time, effort, and care that makes them their parents. In addition, they have a biological filiation with a third party who has provided either maternal or paternal substance (genetic), and they may or may not animate that substance or, indeed, have it animated for them. The donor sibling families who share photographs, who talk on Skype, who may meet at "clan" reunions, all remark upon, and value, the resemblance (the familiarity) they discern between donor siblings—a resemblance that is not necessarily as clear or as easy for non-kin or the stranger to apprehend.[10] In the absence of biological links, some parents of donor-conceived children, nevertheless, forge kinship connections with their children's donor siblings. Freeman et. al. (2009) cite one mother as saying of her child's donor siblings:

> I felt very maternal toward my son's brother and sister. . . . What really surprised me was just how strongly I felt towards them. It changed my concept of "family." I know that genetically, I have no relationship to any of them but they are my family, they are a part of me. They just

10. Diana Marre and Joan Bestard (2009) provide an insightful analysis of the role of family resemblance in the forging of kinship between Catalan parents and their adopted children.

> are!! . . . If they ever needed anything, I'd do whatever I could for them. . . . They mean the world to me! (Freeman et. al 2009: 512)

Genetic connections between donor siblings may or may not be socially activated and, if they are, they are augmented and layered with varying densities of social texture. Although evidence is scant, donor-conceived people who are connecting themselves to siblings through the donor they have in common do not appear to be forging the same kind of relationship with the donor's own children. Despite the fact that both donor siblings and the donor's children are, in this kinship idiom, "half-siblings" (that is, genetically related to the donor in a similar way), donor half-siblings appear to have more in common with each other than they do with the donor's children who are privy to care and attention from the donor (their father) and to the relationship between their father and their mother that cements their kinship in a different way. Not only do donor siblings know themselves to share genes, they also share a donor and the fact of donation. We might say they partake in each other's conception.

Sahlins' "mutuality of being" suggests proximity. The emergence of the donor sibling as a key kin figure relies on the intimacies of social media where propinquity is not necessarily synonymous with proximity. Donor siblings may never meet face to face and perhaps one will drop off, or drop out, of the other's kinship sphere through mutual lack of attention or nourishment. But they are, nevertheless, a reminder of the unexpected and unpredictable means in which kinship can be ignited through desire, will and intention, even if the spark came from elsewhere. In this case it is *knowing* of a genetic connection that sparks the interest and effort entailed in finding one's donor sibling.

With *What kinship is—and is not,* Sahlins has done anthropology (social, cultural, and biological) a great service. In rendering the state of the art so boldly and clearly he has given us an anchor in the choppy currents of kinship. He has given us a position to mull over, expand upon, depart from, and revisit time and time again in the forseeable future.

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