



Small Moments by Renee Nault [www.reneenault.com](http://www.reneenault.com)

## A planetary tangle of relations

Peter Reason welcomes a five-volume book series exploring deep connection

*Kinship: Belonging in a World of Relations (Volumes 1–5)*  
Gavin van Horn, Robin Wall Kimmerer, John Hausdoerffer (eds.)  
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We live in a world of kinship – this is an idea whose time has come. Or, more accurately, it is an ancient idea that needs urgently to be restored. But kinship is not just an idea: it is experience, an existential given, that we modern humans must find our way back to. This major project from the Centre for Humans and Nature is to be welcomed as a significant contribution to this restoration.

In the Kinship series, more than 80 essays, poems and interviews are presented in five volumes: *Planet*, *Place*, *Partners*, *Persons*, and *Practices* (all also available separately). They share a common introduction by Gavin van Horn, one of the three editors. He writes that while these titles reflect the scale of their subject matter, the essays might also be regarded as a web, a meshwork of threads. He asks us to

think of ‘kin’ as ‘kinning’ – not as a noun, but as a verb, as process. Nouns are useful, he tells us, but they can lead to reification, toward thinking of the world as mere matter. He outlines three significant threads through the web: *cosmovision*, understanding nonhumans as persons, as loci of meaning and significance; *kinship ecology*, an intertwining of social, mythological, and practical; and *language*, referencing Robin Wall Kimmerer’s call for a ‘language of animacy’ that avoids objectifying pronouns.

It is inevitable, in such a wide-ranging collection, that each reader will find that some pieces appeal more than others. This also presents a challenge for the reviewer. I have chosen to pick out two or three contributions from each volume that particularly engaged my attention.

In Volume 1, *Planet*, geologist Marcia Bjornerud writes

of her experience introducing geology to first-year undergraduates. Her aspiration is that becoming familiar with the narratives of the planet, with the plots and protagonists that shaped and continue to shape Earth, will engender a feeling of affinity with everything on the planet. She wants her students to develop a sense of themselves as citizens of Earth. Philosopher Ginny Battson picks up this sense of affinity as she writes of swimming in a cove in South Devon. “With each wave and tide flowing into the cove, living beings – with their molted, glittering micromatter – migrate up and then down out and then back.” Vulnerable after surgery, she ventures cautiously into the water, drawing on her human imagination to experience this relatedness directly. A lovely integration of science, philosophy and experience.

In Volume 2, *Place*, Enrique Salmón, Rarámuri Indian and ethnobiologist, writes of Indigenous knowing a place: “Your heart is always rooted in this land.” Rarámuri people feel a duty to honour the land through ceremony “in order to maintain the proper cycles of life... we understand that everything around us is a direct relative of ours.” Political scientist Bethany Barratt writes of participating in resistance to the KXL Pipeline. Neighbouring farmers legally transfer part of their land to the Ponca Nation as an act of restoration of cultural value and legal protection. But, as Casey Camp-Horinek, representing the Ponca, says: “The words of this document refer to ownership, but the land does not belong to us. Instead, we belong to the land. My ancestors, for whom my children are named, are in this land. If your ancestors are in this land, you too belong to the land.” If we belong to the land, what we do to the land we do also to ourselves.

In Volume 3, *Partners*, I was very moved by Martin Mueller’s poetic prose eulogy to “wild, vibrant, unstoppable expressions of aliveness” – a dandelion finds its way through a crack in the pavement, an Arctic tern cracks open her eggshell, sea wolves paddle across a stretch of ocean. But there is also tragedy: “A thousand Chinook salmon, or perhaps ten thousand. They know no adequate embodied response to the dam that blocks the Elwha River... Ten thousand incarnate river intelligences, dumfounded... They leap against the dam. They do not stop... they crush their heads trying.” Rowan White, Mohawk farmer and Seed Keeper, shows how we learn in partnership: “I have apprenticed myself to the food plants that have become my grandmas and wise elders over the decades... We push against the modern narrative of disconnection that tells us we simply live on the Earth instead of inside a beautiful stored relational landscape.” And she suggests we “lean into a practice of reverent curiosity”, a phrase I find immensely appealing.

In Volume 4, *Persons*, naturalist and writer Lyanda Fern Lynn Haupt explores our relationship with starlings, widely regarded in North America as invasive pests. But one starling, Carmen, lives with Haupt in her house, very much part of the family, a being of intelligence and attunement. How do we square our understanding that starlings belong with us in ‘kindred continuity’, and disrupt local ecosystems? Haupt turns to the old phrase ‘kith and kin’. *Kin* refers to close relatives, while *kith* is a relationship based on knowledge of place, the close landscape. The presence of starlings is complex, but “Complexity is not the same as contradiction. We are asked to

walk lightly and intelligently within an essential ambiguity.”

Also in this volume, Graham Harvey, scholar and practitioner of contemporary animism, contrasts “the human separatist movement” named ‘Modernity’ with the animist view of “a world full of persons, human and otherwise, all more or less close kin, all deserving of respect”. His is a very clear articulation of animism, scholarly, yet strongly based in experiential enquiry. Scholarship is not a detached activity, he tells us, but “there are urgent demands on us that require animated engagement.”

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In Volume 5, *Practice*, I was drawn to explorations of ritual and ceremony. Botanist Matt Hall, exploring kinship with plants, explores ritual as part of a gift economy. Ritual entails giving up something, and what modern humans have to give up is their sense of superiority. Hall writes that, after playing with different forms, he is left with two essential ritual gestures: asking permission, and listening. Later in the volume, Tiokasin Ghosthorse of the Cheyenne River Lakota Nation tells of a visit of peacemakers to Auschwitz/Birkenau, asking, “Why would anyone seek a ‘Final Solution’ to exterminate others?” When the party gathers in a circle for a pipe ceremony, other animals seem to gather with them, as so often happens. As the ceremony proceeded, there arose within the circle “no feeling of need for anything else”. His writing drew me deeply into a quality of ceremony and his understanding that, no matter what language we speak, “a hidden, nurturing world has already discovered you and is already at work within you.”

There are so many ways into understanding kinship in these volumes, so much of immense value. I appreciate that the editors do not attempt a ‘single vision’, a monolithic view. But equally, the reader may be overwhelmed by the diversity. There is an Epilogue – a conversation between the editors and one contributor to each volume – but for me this was too loose to be satisfactory, journalistic rather than appropriately scholarly. My selection reflects my preference for writing that has conceptual clarity as well as expression. I would like to see a more systematic editorial reflection on the different patterns that run through the diverse threads. The richness of the material deserves this. R

Peter Reason is currently engaged in a series of experiential cooperative enquiries exploring living cosmos panpsychism. What would it be like to live in a world of sentient beings rather than inert objects? How would we relate to such a world?