



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Changelings

Alterity beyond difference

Citation for published version:

Course, M 2017, 'Changelings: Alterity beyond difference', *Folk Life*, vol. 55, no. 1, pp. 12-21.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2017.1319140>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/04308778.2017.1319140](https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2017.1319140)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Folk Life

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Folk Life on 29 June 2017, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/04308778.2017.1319140>

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Changelings: alterity beyond difference

Magnus Course, University of Edinburgh

I'm looking through you; where did you go?
I thought I knew you; what did I know?

Lennon & McCartney

We'll need an abstract here, followed by about 10 keywords.

Bridget Cleary met her death in Ballyvadlea, County Tipperary in March 1895 surrounded by her loving family: her father, her husband, her aunt, and her cousins. Yet it was at the hands of this same family that she died; tortured, beaten, and finally burnt to death. Then and at the subsequent trial, they insisted that it was not Bridget Cleary whom they had killed, but an imposter, a cuckoo, a fairy changeling who had stolen Bridget's place. Her husband Michael was convinced that upon the changeling's death, the real Bridget Cleary would ride out at dawn from the old fort at Kilenagranagh on a white horse, giving her kin the opportunity to seize her back from the fairies. Bridget Cleary was never to ride out of Kilenagranagh on a white or any other colour of horse, and reading the many subsequent accounts of her death, perhaps the saddest parts refer to the slow and painful realization among at least some of her kin during long years of incarceration that it was not a fairy changeling that they had killed and buried in a boggy shallow grave, but Bridget herself.¹

One hundred years later and five thousand miles away, Jorge's friends and neighbours are deeply concerned. He is becoming poorer and poorer, his body thinner and thinner, he's drinking more and more, and neglecting the few animals and crops he has. Despite the fact that Jorge is a bachelor, *kawchu*, and lives alone in the Mapuche community of Oño Oñoko in southern Chile, passers-by hear the sounds of family life coming from within his house.² For it is said that Jorge does indeed have a wife, yet not a real wife, but a *pun domo*, a night woman, a malignant cuckoo-like parasite who deceives him, takes his time, his affection, and all of his productive resources. Unless he can come to see her for what she really is, she will suck the vitality out of him and leave him broken, or more likely dead. Any children born to their union will be parasitic creatures, voraciously devouring everything in sight, reducing their unwitting father to ruin. Yet the more his neighbours and kin worry, the deeper Jorge is sucked in, the deeper he falls in love.

Changelings, of one kind or another, are among us and one effect of exploring them is to make you see them wherever you turn. From the English boy who suddenly appears to his father as a ISIS flag-wielding jihadi in Syria, to the beloved TV presenters of the 1980s now revealed as paedophiles, the potential to be profoundly and tragically mistaken about whom we think we know is an integral part of any social relation.³ Changelings, or more accurately a changeling dynamic, proliferate because quite literally anybody can be one. In this essay, I want to explore this potential as a key component of any and indeed all social relations, for the changeling phenomena, despite its cultural and historical specificity, nevertheless draws our attention to the ubiquitous capacity for alterity to erupt from within even the most intimate relation. In addressing this issue, I will attempt to highlight two key points: first, I would like to reassert the role of alterity as a fundamental component in all social relations, and second, I would like to suggest that, perhaps counter-intuitively, this alterity can be apprehended as much through similarity as through difference.

I will return to each of these points in due course, but to give the reader some indication of the direction of the essay, the first point is concerned with the fact that although the constitutive role of alterity in social relations has been forcefully argued for several non-Western contexts, such as Rupert Stasch's work on Melanesia, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's work on Amazonia, or Peter Geschiere's work on Africa, these positions have explicitly gone against the grain of an implicit, default assumption that social relations are premised on a benign similarity.⁴ All of the above mentioned authors describe contexts in which alterity is *intrinsic* to social relations, rather than simply what occurs in their absence. In doing so, both Stasch and Geschiere highlight alternative genealogies of sociality in Western thought, ones in which influential essays like Freud's *The Uncanny* (2003 [1919]) or Simmel's *The Stranger* (1971 [1908]) play a key role.⁵ One of the goals of this essay is to provide a further example of the relevance of this approach to a European context. The second, somewhat related point that I want to make is that our thinking needs to go beyond a simple opposition of difference and identity if it is to fully comprehend alterity within social relations. Again, I am following other recent scholarship in arguing that similarity may itself index alterity. Take, for example, Toby Kelly's work on doctors' evaluations of asylum seekers claiming experiences of torture.⁶ Far from rejecting claims because of the "otherness" of the purported victims, doctors' scepticism is located precisely in recognizing their own ability to deceive in the other. As Kelly notes, "the denial of another's suffering is not always about a failure to recognize mutual humanity. It can also be a product of a sense of fundamental similarity, based on assumptions about the mutual capacity to dissimulate".⁷ In this essay, I will focus primarily on the

changeling phenomenon as it occurs in both Irish and Scottish Gaelic culture, although I will return to southern Chile and the broader implications of thinking about alterity within relations later on. For although the cases I am going to discuss may well appear either culturally and temporally remote, exotic if you will, I do think that a similar dynamic of alterity to that present in the changeling encounter is also present in many far more mundane cases far closer to home.

The Case of Bridget Cleary

Cleary's death has been the focus of intense scholarly and public interest, at least in part because of the sheer weight of contemporary evidence available – from police records, court transcripts of eyewitness statements, and numerous articles in the newspapers of the time, to oral histories in Tipperary today. At least two full-length monographs, a dozen or so academic journal articles, a documentary, and a successful stage play, have explored the events of those fateful days in unrelenting detail. And the scholarship surrounding the case has been of an incredibly high standard; Angela Bourke's book *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* won the Irish Times Non-Fiction Prize, and is certainly one of the most thorough and compelling works of social history that I have read.

The analytical foci of the works surrounding Cleary's death are primarily concerned with first, colonialism and media, and second, shifting gender roles. The first approach highlights the fact that Bridget Cleary's death occurred just as the Irish Home Rule Bill was being debated in the British parliament. Much of the opposition to Irish home rule focused on the assertion that the Irish simply were not fit to govern themselves, a fact supposedly indexed by the prevalence of purportedly barbaric pre-Christian superstitions. Proponents of home rule, on the other hand, emphasized state failures of care, and the marginalization of the rural poor. Social historians interested in the case have traced the perfect political alignment of both local and national newspapers with their reporting of the case.⁸ So whereas unionist papers emphasize savagery and superstition, nationalist newspapers portray those involved as highly idiosyncratic and isolated individuals, let down by the negligence of the British state. Hand in hand with its political implications, the case also brings to the fore rapidly changing gender roles in rural Ireland. Thus much has been made of the fact that Bridget Cleary was, highly unusually for the time, but rapidly becoming less so, a woman of independent means. She had a trade, as a seamstress, and she had the means of production (a sewing machine) to make that trade pay handsomely. We learn of rumours circulating

widely of her infidelity and unrestrained sexuality, a well-known and widely-used ploy for putting women “back in their place.”

The thoroughness of the research behind these points is such that, in many ways, there really is not much more to add. The case of Cleary clearly fed into political debates as a kind of metonym for the rural Irish population as a whole, and likewise, Cleary’s refusal to accept the staunchly conservative gendered norms of rural Tipperary heightened her vulnerability. But what I want to focus on in this essay, is neither the politics of gender nor the politics of colonialism, but rather the inherently complex and shifting micro-politics of alterity at play within Cleary herself. “Are you Bridget Cleary?” her kin repeatedly ask her. What would cause a father to ask such a question of his daughter, or a husband such a question of his wife? How could this woman whom they had known her entire life suddenly appear as someone else?

Fairies and Alterity

The term “fairy” is, as many commentators have pointed out, a poor and somewhat misleading translation of the Gaelic root concept, *sìth* in both Irish and Scottish Gaelic (Black, 2013; Narvaez, 1991).⁹ The sparkling, fluttering, Tinkerbell-esque creatures familiar to Disney viewers are very much the products of a nineteenth century romantic (and commercial) imagination.¹⁰ Put simply, fairies were the essence of Gaelic alterity. They were omni-present features of cultural, social, and physical landscapes. Thus every district had its *cnoc an t-sìth* or “fairy hill” under which fairies dwelt, and through which humans might pass into their realm. Many of the most popular tunes on both bagpipe and fiddle in contemporary Scottish traditional music are said to have been composed by fairies, and either traded with or gifted to humans.¹¹ Fairies were held to be neither good nor bad, neither moral nor immoral, but fundamentally amoral and self-serving, as likely to hinder as to help. It is important to point out that while fairy belief coexisted with witchcraft beliefs, they were very far from the same thing; fairies are at a tangent to witches, and many of the defenses against witches would not be effective against fairies, and vice versa.

A large proportion of Irish and Scottish folklore is concerned with fairies, yet the question of what, exactly, fairies are escapes a definitive answer due to the diversity of explanations in the existent sources. Some see them as a distant cultural memory of the remnants of an autochthonous pre-Celtic population, a kind of pseudo-historical explanation which ties fairies’ well-known abhorrence of iron to their displacement by iron-wielding Celtic-

speaking tribes in the millennium before Christ. Other sources portray fairies as angels hurled from Heaven alongside Lucifer, but repenting halfway down to Hell, thus trapped just under the surface of this world. Robert Kirk's famous 17th century treatise *The Secret Commonwealth of the Elves, Fauns, and Fairies* presents a view of fairies immediately familiar to me from my previous research in indigenous South America, in which fairies are simply the double of living humans.¹² They live in a parallel world organized along identical lines to our own. But what are bread and wine in their world, are revealed as excrement and urine in our own. There is thus a great diversity to fairy beliefs across the Gaelic-speaking world, but also a certain consistency. Fairies are very old, fairly grumpy, they hate iron and fire, but they are incredibly musical. They dwell in specific locations in the landscape, often remains of prehistoric forts or burial mounds. The key feature I want to draw out for the purposes of this essay, is that they are simultaneously like us and not like us. They are motivated by the same passions, but the contours of the world in which these passions are played out are fundamentally different. To be truly other, they must also be somewhat the same, a point to which I will return.

Changelings in Gaelic culture

The case of Bridget Cleary mentioned above is probably the best-known, and certainly the best-documented case of fairy changelings of which I am aware. Yet it is far, far from unique. Indeed, the idea of changelings has a wide geographical and historical spread. Martin Luther, for example, famously urged local authorities in Anhalt in Germany to throw a "changeling" infant into the river.¹³ Yet despite their appearance across Europe (and indeed, beyond) it seems that ideas about changelings were particularly elaborated within Celtic language areas, thus several accounts describe changelings in Brittany, Cornwall, and Wales.¹⁴ In this essay, however, I want to focus specifically on changelings within the Gaelic culture of Ireland and Scotland, and in doing so I draw heavily on Ronald Black's invaluable edition of John Gregorson Campbell's writings on the topic.¹⁵

A typical account comes from Glengarry, and was published in 1910, though presumably relates to events somewhat earlier: *"There was a widow in Glengarry who had a baby boy. One day when he was sleeping quietly in his cradle she went to the well for water, and when she got back he was screaming as if in great pain. She gave him a drink as quickly as she could [...] She gave him another drink, and this time while he was at her breast she noticed that he had two teeth, each more than an inch long, and that his face was looking old and withered. She said to herself, 'I'm finished now. But I'll keep quiet and see what comes of*

this.” Next day she picked up the baby, covered him with a shawl and set off as if she was bringing him to the next township. There was a big burn in the way, and as she was wading through the ford, the wizened creature stuck his head out of the shawl and said “Many a big fold [of sheep] have I seen on the banks of this stream.” She did not wait to hear any more. She threw the baby into a deep pool below the ford, where he tossed about in the swirling water, screaming that “if he had known in advance that was the trick she was going to play on him, he would have shown her another.’ Then she heard a sound like a flock of birds, but saw nothing until she looked at her feet, and there was her own baby.”¹⁶

Put simply, a changeling – *tàcharan* in Scottish Gàidhlig and *sibheire* in Irish Gaelic – is a creature of fairy origin who takes the place of a human. Although there’s great diversity within accounts of changelings, there are some recurring features or characteristics:

Age: Changelings **are frequently** (although not **always**, as we have seen with the case of Cleary above) infants, and the accompanying stories tell of babies replaced with fairy infants, while their mothers were fetching water from the well. Despite being physically identical to the stolen infants, changelings frequently give both verbal and physical clues to their age – they quickly grow teeth or have a wizened appearance, and several accounts reveal that they cannot help themselves but boast of their great age and all that they have seen.

Appetite: A second characteristic is the voraciousness of the changeling. This is manifest in two ways: either they eat too much, or they refuse human food. So many accounts speak of the voraciousness of changelings who can never be satiated, while others speak of changelings’ desire for strange foods. For example, a woman near Loughrea in Ireland told the folklorist Lady Gregory: *“There was a fairy in a house in Eserkelly fourteen years. Bridget Collins she was called [...] she never kept the bed, but she’d sit in the corner of the kitchen on a mat, and from a good stout lump of a girl that she was, she wasted to nothing, and her teeth grew as long as your finger, and then they dropped out. And she’d eat nothing at all, only crabs and sour things.”*¹⁷ And, as we shall see when we return to the case of Cleary, it is ultimately her refusal to eat jam and bread for a third time which seems to clinch the case against her.

Fire and Iron: A third characteristic of all changelings, and one which reveals their fairy nature, is that they are utterly petrified of both fire and iron. This is revealing of their fairy origin, and the surest way to “out” a changeling is to threaten them with fire, as again we will see in the case of Cleary.

Language: The true language of fairies is more or less unintelligible to humans, although it does appear in many traditional songs sung in both Ireland and Scotland to this day. An example from Campbell’s compendium of Gaelic occult belief tells of a changeling

who, upon meeting another changeling while the human mother eavesdrops from a cupboard says: "The muggle maggle/wants the loan of the black luggle laggle/to take the maggle from the grain."¹⁸

Physical: changelings are also marked by very slight deviations from the physical norm, such as one leg being slightly longer than the other. Michael Cleary tells his neighbour of Bridget: "She was not my wife. She was too fine to be my wife; she was two inches taller than my wife!"

Interestingly, accounts of changelings are not confined to the folktales of oral tradition, but pass consistently into the historical record. Their perceived prevalence across huge swathes of rural Scotland is indicated by the fact that, for example, in the eighteenth century kirk poor records for Ardnamurchan, several individuals receiving poor support from the church have "Changeling" written in the "Remarks" column next to their names.¹⁹

There is not surprisingly a great deal of lore on how to deal with changelings, and here we see something of a divergence in Irish and Scottish traditions. In Scotland it appears as though abandonment was the primary strategy. The changeling would be abandoned in some desolate spot, occasionally a beach or a crossroads, and its fairy kin would take pity upon it, rescue it, and thus be compelled to return the stolen human back to its home. So in 1862, Dr Arthur Mitchell, a man with the enviable job title of Deputy Commissioner for Lunacy in Scotland, tells of a child *"who is believed to be a changeling of the fairies, who are supposed to steal away the human child, and leave for it one of their own young-old children to be nursed. I know of two idiots in one of the Western Islands exactly of the same character, and also believed to be changelings of the fairies. The only remedy for this of which I heard, is to place the changeling on the beach by the water side, when the tide is out, and pay no attention to its screams. The fairies, rather than suffer their own to be drowned by the rising waters, spirit it away, and restore the child they had stolen"*²⁰ (1862: 286). In Ireland, the traditional way to deal with a changeling was with fire. In both the case of abandonment and burning, the death or flight of the changeling would automatically lead to the return of the abducted human, or at least the possibility of this return.

Scholarship on changelings has, for the most part, sought to explain changelings. As we have seen from the earlier discussion of the Cleary case, both the politics of colonialism and the politics of gender have been posited as explanatory factors. Yet perhaps the most established and widespread explanation of changelings as a general phenomenon is as a culturally-specific idiom in which to talk about disability.²¹ A variety of physical and

psychological disorders may effect the sudden transformation of people we know into people we do not know. Scholars such as Eberley go further, trying to tie the specificities of changelings' appearance and behaviour to specific conditions: thus premature aging, uncontrolled appetites, elongated teeth, etc, can all be tied to symptoms of a variety of medically-recognized ailments.²² A different perspective, but one which also, to a certain extent "explains away" changelings would be that of a scholar such as Ronald Black who links the changeling phenomenon to the famine, constant malnutrition, and high rates of infant mortality widespread in large parts of Ireland and Scotland throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. And to drag the reader briefly back over to the other side of the Atlantic, we can see that the Mapuche changeling, the night woman or *pun domo*, can also be approached from the perspective of the politics of gender. Rural Mapuche society is in many ways quite patriarchal, and in its insistence on virilocal post-marital residence, women frequently find themselves in the position of potentially-divisive outsiders. While not doubting the salience of an explanation of *pun domo* as a commentary on the place of women in rural Mapuche society, again it leaves much out of the picture.²³

Each of these approaches has something to be said for it, and each, I think, offers a partial but never a complete explanation for the phenomenon. In this essay, I take a different tack, for my concern here is not in any way to explain changelings, but rather to explore the internal micro-politics of the changeling encounter. In other words, I am more concerned with the how the phenomenon works rather than with what the phenomenon is. Rather than explaining changelings away, I am interested in what the complex interplay of alterity with difference and similarity exemplified within the changeling encounter, can reveal to us about human relationships more generally. Such an approach gives the changeling phenomena a degree of autonomy from the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which it occurs. This is not to say that one must believe the phenomena to be "true", nor is it even to hold that those contemporary to the event held it to be "true", but simply that it possesses its own internal logic. It is this logic which I now go on to describe.

Micropolitics of Changeling alterity

What do I mean by "alterity" and "difference", two terms often treated as near synonyms? I am using "alterity" to refer to a fundamentally distinct state of being (in the Gaelic case, "fairy", in the Mapuche case, *pun domo*, but many other states could apply: "fundamentalist," "paedophile," etc.), and I am using "difference" and "similarity" as

perceived indices of the relative proximity of that state. Thus a perceived marker of difference, such as one leg being slightly shorter than the other, is not in itself a condition of alterity, but may be interpretively constructed as an index of it. What I want to try and show is that alterity is premised as much on indices of similarity as it is on difference; or rather, it is a particular combination of difference and similarity which index alterity.²⁴ I will try to demonstrate this within the case of changelings in Gaelic culture, but I would like to speculate that this configuration is particular to relationships more generally. So what are the markers of difference and similarity in the case of changelings? For the sake of simplicity and the abundance of available data, I am going to focus on the Cleary case, drawing in particular on Angela Bourke's book *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*.

Bridget Cleary had been bed-ridden for several days, most probably with bronchitis. She was running a high fever, and became delirious. The doctor was called, but did not come for several days, and when he did finally arrive, he was drunk and became embroiled in a row with Bridget's husband Michael Cleary. The priest, too, was called, and eventually came. He gave Bridget the last rites, not because he thought death imminent, but as a "precautionary measure" and it is at this point that things start to unravel. Several of her cousins, present at these last rites claimed that once the priest's back was turned, Bridget spat out the host and secreted it under the bed sheets. When the local healer or "fairy doctor" Jack Dunne, a man who had known Bridget since birth, arrived, he immediately exclaimed "That is not Bridgie Boland!" Others started to share his doubts. A variety of questions are put to Bridget. Her father, Patrick Boland asks "Are you the daughter of Patrick Boland, wife of Michael Cleary? Answer in the name of God!" "I am Dada, I am the daughter of Pat Boland, in the name of God! "He's making a fairy of me," says Bridget. Over and over again, the people present ask her who she really is. Yet her confirmations do not help her situation, if anything they seem to anger her family even more. As language is a capacity shared with fairies, it cannot alone verify Bridget's humanity. Once the capacity for language is exhausted, those present turn to physical means, threatening her with fire.

"For the love of God, don't burn your wife" says James Kennedy, Bridget's cousin, to Michael. "She's not my wife. She's an old deceiver sent in place of my wife. She's after deceiving me for the last seven or eight days, and deceived the priest today, too, but she won't deceive anyone any more," replies Michael. The final straw is Bridget's refusal to eat bread and jam for a third time. The indices of difference accumulate: she seems two inches taller; she is averse to the Christian sacrament; she is averse to human food; and she cannot do anything for a third time. Yet each index of difference is held in place by one of similarity: she

provides positive responses when asked if she is Bridget; she still looks like Bridget; she stays in human form. Bridget is like Bridget, but not Bridget. Her undeniable similarities to Bridget cast her as somebody deliberately out to deceive, while her differences mark her out as something altogether foreign. Eventually Cleary kills Bridget, knocking her unconscious, and setting her on fire. When her relatives protest, he says “You are a dirty set. You would rather have her with the fairies in Kylenagranagh fort than have her here with me.” He goes on to assure her father that they will have the opportunity to rescue the real Bridget at dawn the following Sunday, when she would ride out from Kylenagranagh on a white horse. Yet by then, nobody could save Bridget. Her family were all imprisoned, and eventually sentenced with varying degrees of severity. Michael Cleary served fifteen years in prison, and upon his release in 1910 emigrated via Liverpool to Montreal, Canada still apparently insistent that it was not the real Bridget whom he had killed.

As stated already, I am not going to try and explain the changeling phenomenon, nor am I going to try and explain the particularities of the Cleary case. It seems to have been a “perfect storm” of disastrous conjunctions and coincidences in which, in Angela Bourke’s words “nobody is entirely to blame, or entirely innocent”.²⁵ What strikes me is how alterity can erupt so suddenly and so violently from within a kinship relation – remember that this is as closely-knit a rural community as one can imagine, every one of the protagonists had known the other their entire lives. So the question is, how do these relationships, which at first sight are the very epitome of a benign sociality premised on shared conviviality, shared commensality, and shared consubstantiality, collapse so suddenly into something else?²⁶ How do people, quite literally in the case of Cleary, become “dehumanized”? I want to turn back briefly to the Mapuche case, to see if certain points of comparison can highlight a central dynamic.

I will not be engaging in a point by point comparison, for my purpose is primarily to highlight certain continuities, but it is nevertheless necessary to mention the many undeniably salient differences. Such differences would include, first, the fact that in the Gaelic case it is the closest family who doubt the kin/changeling, and the neighbours who do not, while in the Mapuche case it is the person closest, the husband, who is deceived while the neighbours see the *pun domo* for what it really is. Perhaps more significant is the fact that in the Gaelic case, the person replaced is actual, while in the Mapuche case it is virtual. In other words, there was an actual Bridget Cleary somewhere, under the fort at Kylenagranagh, who had been replaced, yet in the Mapuche case, the *pun domo* does not replace an actual spouse, but

simply negates the potential for the man to ever marry and enter into a productive relationship.²⁷

Despite these differences, I think both the Gaelic changeling and the Mapuche *pun domo* can, to a certain extent, be approached from the perspective of a shared dynamic of alterity. It might be useful here, to think of the “uncanny” which, according to Freud arises precisely from slight deviations from the familiar, for it is only those things with which we are already familiar and accustomed that hold the potential to become uncanny.²⁸ Changelings, of course, are permanent denizens of this uncanny state, so similar and familiar, yet marked by the slightest indices of alterity. Perhaps we can take Freud’s uncanny and cast it in slightly different terms, and fit it out for a slightly different purpose. For what I would like to do in closing is to explore what the uncanniness of changelings might tell us about a particular kind of human sociality: kinship. This will allow us to address how this dynamic allows alterity to erupt within the most intimate and close relationships.

An increasingly influential contribution to debates about the interplay of difference and similarity in kinship is Marshall Sahlins’ recent assertion that “what kinship is all about” is “mutuality of being”, and by “mutuality of being” Sahlins is referring to “people who are intrinsic to one another’s existence – thus ‘mutual person(s)’, ‘life itself’, ‘intersubjective belonging’.”²⁹ He says that “‘mutuality of being’ will cover the variety of ethnographically documented ways kinship is locally constituted, whether by procreation, social construction, or some combination of these.”³⁰ He goes on to specify that this theory of kinship is manifest in the fact that “kinsmen are people who live each other’s lives and die each other’s deaths. To the extent they lead common lives, they partake of each other’s sufferings and joys, sharing one another’s experiences even as they take responsibility for and feel the effects of each other’s acts”.³¹ And he is surely correct that “mutuality of being” is a large part of what kinship is. But it is not, I would suggest, all that kinship is.³² For Sahlins’ position, while not exactly proclaiming identity-based kinship as the default model of what kinship is, does seem to be foregrounding “mutuality”, or what is shared, as the defining feature of “what kinship is all about,” a position which, following writers such as Geschiere, Stasch, and Viveiros de Castro, I want to suggest tells only half the story.³³

The problem is perhaps that Sahlins’ approach closes down the possibility that difference emerges *out of* the kinship relation. To a certain degree, I’m arguing along similar lines to Lévi-Strauss’s famous argument about the incest taboo, the post-hoc insertion of alterity, in order to make kinship possible.³⁴ In essence, a particular kind of mutuality of being is, for Lévi-Strauss at least, anything but “what kinship is all about” it is that which must be

overcome, must be proscribed against in order for kinship to emerge. Sahlins himself isn't too far from saying this when he says that "the work of culture is to delimit and differentiate the human potential for transpersonal being into determinate kinship relations".³⁵ But can we really oppose culture and kinship? I would suggest that the "differentiation" is best conceptualized not as an external source acting upon kinship, but as already *within* kinship.

To understand how alterity can reside within kinship, we need to differentiate between two slightly different forms of alterity which become neutralized or obfuscated within Sahlins' model. The first of these is the kind of radical, and usually sinister, alterity of which the potential to be something dangerous and other as in the case of the Cleary changeling or the Mapuche *pun domo*, predominates. Sahlins points out that "as the malevolent consumption or penetration of the body of the other, witchcraft and sorcery are rather, by definition, negative kinship".³⁶ The second is simply affinity, brought about by the incest taboo's compulsion for us to engage with people who are in, at least some respects, fundamentally "other." Put simply, in Sahlins' model affinity is absorbed into mutuality, while "occult" practices are excluded from kinship. I suggest that the former is an encompassment too far, the latter an exclusion too near. I want to understand the place of alterity – whether in terms of affinity, or in terms of the more sinister potential of the occult – as internal to what kinship "is all about."

You may at this stage be feeling a certain sense of déjà-vu for we do seem to be falling into a recurring pattern in the history of kinship studies. Take the famous descent vs. alliance debate for example, the former emphasizing "mutuality of being", the latter emphasizing a productive difference founded upon alterity. Looking back at this debate, the obvious response is that most versions of kinship are both at the same time. This argument was of course primarily played out at the level of corporate groups, but the argument I am pushing here is that it equally applies at an intersubjective level – relations are always constituted through a constantly shifting configuration of mutuality of being and alterity. Difference and similarity cannot be placed in a simple chronology in which one precedes or encompasses the other, but are, I would suggest continually emergent properties of any given kinship relation. To describe "mutuality of being" as what kinship is all about is, I think, but half of the story. To my mind, a more compelling theory of kinship would not exclude "negative kinship" as something beyond its perimeters, but engage with it as a fundamental part of "what kinship is."

Changelings are, and probably always have been, marginal, exotic, ambiguous, and unlikely. It is in their very extremity that changelings make certain configurations explicit that

most of the time remain implicit. Yet this is not to say that they are no longer relevant or are absent, for as I have gestured towards – all too briefly in the space available – is that other configurations of alterity raise similar dynamics. The two key points I have tried to make clear are, first, that alterity is not simply indexed by difference, but by a complex interplay in which similarity is as salient as difference; and second, that this interplay of difference and similarity, and the alterity towards which it gestured, is at the very heart of kinship. Mutuality of being necessarily goes hand in hand with its antithesis, a possibility just around every corner.

Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles; at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sussex, and at the Candlelit Seminar, University of Edinburgh. I'm very grateful to the organizers and participants of these venues for their comments and suggestions. Further gratitude is owed to Veena Das, Giovanni Da Col, Emily Lyle, Iain MacKinnon, Jon Mitchell, Lillis Ó Laoire, Dimitri Tsintjionis, and Harry Walker.

Notes

¹ My account of the Cleary case is drawn primarily from data presented in Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (New York, Penguin, 1999) and Joan Hoff & Marian Yates, *The Cooper's Wife is Missing: the trials of Bridget Cleary* (New York, Basic Books, 2000).

² My account of the *pun domo* is drawn from 36 months of ethnographic fieldwork in southern Chile carried out between 2000 and 2012. The Mapuche are an indigenous group of approximately one million people, most of whom live in Chile, but some of whom live across the cordillera in western Argentina. The Mapuche heartland is the Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth regions of southern Chile, although due to urban migration, over half of the Mapuche population is now resident in the Chilean capital, Santiago. My own research is based in rural communities sandwiched between Lago Budi and the Pacific Ocean in southern Chile's Ninth Region, *Becoming Mapuche: Person and Ritual in Indigenous Chile* (Champaign, IL, University of Illinois Press, 2011).

³ See, for example, Dan Davies' aptly-titled *In Plain Sight: the life and lies of Jimmy Saville* (London, Quercus, 2015), an account of the Jimmy Saville affair.

⁴ Rupert Stasch, *Society of Others: kinship and mourning in a West Papuan place*. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009); Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *From the Enemy's Point of View: humanity and divinity in an Amazonian society*. Trans. Catherine Howard, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992). Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 'Gut Feelings about Amazonia: Potential Affinity and the Construction of Sociality' *Beyond the Visible and the Material: The Amerindianization of Society in the Work of Peter Riviere*. Eds. Laura Rival and Neil Whitehead (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992); Peter Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in comparison* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁵ Sigmund Freud. *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock. (London, Penguin, 2003 [1919]); Georg Simmel. 'The Stranger' In *On Individuality and Social Forms*. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1971 [1908])

⁶ Tobias Kelly, 'Sympathy and Suspicion: torture, asylum and humanity.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 18 (2012): 753-768.

⁷ Kelly, *Sympathy and Suspicion*, p.753. Further examples of this kind of approach can be found in Veena Das's accounts of the interplay of scepticism and intimacy in everyday sociality, *Affliction: health, disease, poverty*. (New York, Fordham University Press, 2015); Nils Bubandt and Rane Willerslev's engagement with "the dark side of empathy" 'The Dark Side of Empathy: mimesis, deception, and the magic of alterity' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 57, (2015); and my own account of

Mapuche ritual clowns “becoming white” ‘The Clown Within: becoming white and Mapuche ritual clowns’ *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 55,(2013).

⁸ Bourke, *Burning of Bridget Cleary*; Hoff and Yates, *The Cooper’s Wife*.

⁹ See, for example, Ronald Black’s introduction to *The Gaelic Otherworld: Rev. John Gregorson Campbell’s Superstitions of the Highlands and the Islands of Scotland and Witchcraft and Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh, Birlinn, 2013); and Peter Narvaez’s edited collection, *The Good People: new fairylore essays* (New York, Garland, 1991).

¹⁰ See Diane Purkiss, *Troublesome Things: a history of fairies and fairy tales* (London, Penguin, 2000)

¹¹ See Tiber Falzett’s “‘Tighinn o’n Cridhe’—‘Coming from the Centre’: An Ethnography of Sensory Metaphor on Scottish Gaelic Communal Aesthetics (PhD Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2014).

¹² Good examples of this phenomenon in Amazonia include, Pedro Cesarino’s ‘De duplos e estereoscópios: paralelismo e personificação nos cantos xamanísticos ameríndios.’ *Mana*, 12, (2006) and Tania Lima’s ‘The Two and Its Multiple: reflections on perspectivism in a Tupi cosmology’ *Ethnos*, 64(1996).

¹³ M. Miles, ‘Martin Luther and Childhood Disability in 16th Century Germany’ *Journal of Religion, Disability, and Health*, 5(2001).

¹⁴ See S. MacPhilib, ‘The Changeling (ML 5058): Irish Versions of a Migratory Legend in their International Context’ *Bealoideas*, 59 (1991); and Linda-May Ballard ‘A Singular Changeling?’ *Folk Life: Journal of Ethnological Studies*, 52, (2014).

¹⁵ Black, *The Gaelic Otherworld*.

¹⁶ Black, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, p.lvi

¹⁷ Black, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, p.li

¹⁸ Black, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, p.48

¹⁹ Black, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, p.98

²⁰ Arthur Mitchell’s report to the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1862).

²¹ See, for example, Peter Narvaez’s edited collection, *The Good People: new fairylore essays* (New York, Garland, 1991), and Susan Schoon Eberley, “Fairies and the Folklore of Disability: Changelings, Hybrids and the Solitary Fairy” *Folklore*, 99(1998).

²² Susan Eberley, “Fairies and the Folklore of Disability”, pp. 58-77.

²³ Course, *Becoming Mapuche*.

²⁴ Cf. Kelly, ‘Sympathy and Suspicion’

²⁵ Bourke, *Burning of Bridge Cleary*, p.209

²⁶ This is perhaps a not altogether dissimilar question to that asked by Doug Hollan and Jason Throop when does empathy cease, both as a possibility and as a goal - in the introduction to a recent special issue, ‘Whatever Happened to Empathy? Introduction.’ *Ethos*, 36(2008). See also, Das, *Affliction*.

²⁷ In this sense, both changelings and pun domo correspond to what Michel Serres identifies as *The Parasite* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007). For an anthropological interrogation of the figure of the parasite, see Giovanni Da Col, ‘The Poisoner and the Parasite: cosmo-economics, fear, and hospitality among Dechen Tibetans’ *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 18 (2012).

²⁸ Freud, *The Uncanny*.

²⁹ See Marshall Sahlins, ‘What Kinship Is (Part One)’ and ‘What Kinship Is (Part Two)’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society*, 17 (2011).

³⁰ Sahlins, ‘What Kinship Is’ p.3

³¹ Sahlins, ‘What Kinship Is’ p.14

³² See the collected responses to Sahlins’ argument in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 3 (2013).

³³ Stasch, *Society of Others*; Viveiros de Castro, *From the Enemy’s Point of View*; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, ‘Gut Feelings about Amazonia’; Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust*.

³⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. (Boston, Beacon Press, 1977 [1949]).

³⁵ Sahlins, ‘What Kinship Is’ p.230

³⁶ Sahlins, ‘What Kinship Is’ p.237

A note with your institutional affiliation and contact details here.