SPECIAL SECTION

INTRODUCTION

(De)materializing Kinship—Holding Together Mutuality and Difference

Kathryn E. Goldfarb and Caroline E. Schuster

Abstract: Although kinship studies have traditionally focused on ‘solidarity’ and ‘mutuality’, dis-alignment, exclusion, and difference are equally crucial foci for analysis. In this introduction, we explore articulations of mutuality and difference through the lens of materiality, particularly the matter of politics and value and the semiotics of material life. We suggest that non-mutuality and exclusion are especially apparent in contexts where kinship intersects with the consolidation of economic and human capital. We then draw attention to the ways in which material signs are productive forces of relatedness in day-to-day interactions between humans, non-humans, and other material things. By examining the gaps and fissures within kinship through the lens of material practice, the contributors to this special section uncover new opportunities for critical engagement with theories of difference, semiotics, and value.

Keywords: difference, exclusion, kinship, materiality, mutuality, relatedness, semiotics, value

We begin our inquiries into kinship with a question and a provocation. While kinship relationships are often explored through a focus on ‘mutuality’, what do we gain empirically, theoretically, and politically by exploring the *non*-mutuality that we argue is also inherent within kinship? We contribute to the vibrant conversation in anthropology that has refocused attention on the shared substances of relatedness,¹ which has productively focused analysis on everyday practices, embodiment, and material objects. Our question also emerges out of our commitment to understanding the figurations of race, gender, class, and nation that place difference at the heart of relational belonging. Our interest in this matter is both conceptual and political. By thematizing dis-alignment, exclusion,

and non-mutuality in kinship, we seek an alternative grounds for comparative study in anthropology that does not presume mutuality and that incorporates otherness as a necessary focus in order to understand relational belonging. We endeavor to comprehend the deeply intimate ways that exclusion and difference are propagated.

This guest-edited special section emphasizes materiality as a starting point for anthropological analyses of relatedness. First, we suggest that attention to materiality is an important angle from which to examine the ways in which the field of ‘new kinship studies’ has approached relatedness in the years following David Schneider’s (1984) *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*. Schneider famously argued that anthropologists were merely imposing a Eurocentric priority on biogenetic blood ties on their analyses of all kinship relationships. In response, anthropologists have turned to explorations of non-biologically rooted relatedness, focusing on how kinship emerges over time through caregiving relationships and in response to affirmative ‘choices’ to create kinship ties (Weston 2013).

While these perspectives on kinship suggest key insights and continue to challenge biological or heteronormative affinal underpinnings of relatedness, we argue that too often anthropological analysis has focused on exactly the ‘diffuse, enduring solidarity’ (Schneider 1968) of earlier studies, maintaining a concept of kinship as one rooted in ‘mutuality of being’ (Sahlins 2011a, 2011b, 2013). This focus on kinship as enduring solidarity or mutuality comes at an important cost. Although kinship *ideals* are often (but not always or everywhere) centered on mutuality, the assumption that kinship *is* a state of mutuality forecloses important questions regarding the relationship of social norms to real-life situations (Brightman 2013). Most strikingly, a focus on mutuality can conceal the important ways that difference, non-mutuality, and dis-alignment are often at the heart of relational belonging (see Yanagisako and Collier 1987). Our ethnographically grounded approach to materializations of relatedness provides a critical lens for exploring durable exclusions, anxieties about (in)appropriate difference and similarity, and destabilized social ties. Rather than presuming mutuality as a condition of kinship, we refocus on the politics of defining and claiming similarity or mutuality as the core principle of relational belonging.

What sort of ties are we talking about when we foreground non-mutuality within kinship relations? Despite their diverse ethnographic, methodological, and theoretical orientations, the articles in this special section share a concern with embodiment, material objects, senses, and substances. And while a broader definition of materiality is outside of the scope of this introduction,² we note that materiality has long been a central theoretical concern for anthropology. Indeed, it might be said that “our discipline is fundamentally concerned with the perceptible qualities of the world” (Chumley and Harkness 2013: 3). Drawing inspiration from diverse bodies of scholarship, including material culture studies, linguistic anthropology, feminist and queer theories, and science studies, we find that rather than trying to specify and characterize particular material properties or generate typologies of things, a more fruitful avenue is to locate and explore material practices. To emphasize this point,

we set as the task of this collection to consider how kinship relationships are materialized and dematerialized, thereby giving central place to the contingent and emergent conditions of material connections within everyday practice.

Second, in our analyses we cross materiality with kinship in order to explore two interrelated concepts that are of vital importance to understanding the wider stakes of relatedness today: the politics of value and semiotics. Put another way, we put forward a perspective on materiality rooted in historically and culturally specific meaning-making projects. We expand a conversation already well under way in feminist and queer theories and in social studies of science, which has been aptly described as the ‘new materialisms’ (Alaimo and Hekman 2008a; Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010). Materiality has become a central analytic for science studies and feminist scholarship, partly in reaction to the ‘linguistic turn’ of the social sciences that privileged discursive and social constructionist perspectives on bodies and subjectivity rather than biologically rooted notions of gender (Butler 1990). Recent attention to materiality has been, then, a recognition that the linguistic turn has hindered serious attention to the materiality of biology in philosophical and social scientific theorizations of subjectivity and agency. But if the linguistic turn has elided a focus on materiality, we suggest that the ‘new materialisms’ conversation has itself sidelined the semiotic and discursive aspects of everyday life, to the disadvantage of rich explorations of the ways that interpersonal relationships (the content of kinship) connect to history and to broader power relations within societies.

While motivated in large part by a feminist politics to problematize normative understandings of self, a focus on the ‘new materialisms’ is in danger of neglecting the human and very political lived experiences of difference and exclusion.³ Without rigorous engagement with discursive and semiotic approaches to sociality, analysts risk recreating the divisions to which the linguistic turn originally responded. Building out of careful attention to the ‘material-semiotic’ interconnections among human and non-human subjectivities and bodies, microbes, technologies, and environments that Donna Haraway (1997) has so compellingly examined, while also attending to value as a performative cultural production, we advance a project to prioritize materiality in richly ethnographic theorizations of relatedness.

In what follows, we highlight two themes—value and semiotics—that are key to our own theorizations of kinship as they speak to the articles featured in this special section. We close with a brief discussion of the importance of keeping in mind not only similarity but also difference in social scientific investigations of kinship and relatedness.

Why Materiality? The Matter of Politics and Value

There has been steady interest in the reasons for and stakes in separating kinship and economy as distinct analytic domains (Comaroff 1987; McKinnon 2001; McKinnon and Cannell 2013b; Yanagisako and Collier 1987). A body of rich ethnographic studies addresses the thorough intermingling of kinship

in economic markets, going beyond the ways that money reshapes domestic life to uncover “sentiments as forces of production” (Yanagisako 2002: 7) at the heart of capitalist economies. These analyses share a common concern—and provocative insight—about the forms of hierarchical affiliation that organize kinship relatedness, as well as certain forms of economic sociality that have been influenced by the modern corporation (Marcus 2005; Marcus and Hall 1992; Yanagisako 2002) and present-day market participation (McKinnon 2001; Schuster 2015; Shever 2012). Anthropologists working across questions of value and relatedness have documented novel sites of kinship production that are emerging alongside new economic arrangements, from family-oriented entrepreneurial subjects (Elyachar 2010; Freeman 2014) to the ‘brotherhood of Freemason sisters’ (Mahmud 2014) in Italian masonic lodges. Our focus on materiality sets these forms of social organization in motion, showing how they are constructed and fall apart in everyday practice. In this collection of articles, the gaps of non-mutuality, exclusion, and difference are especially apparent in contexts where kinship production has collided with value production. We use materialization and de-materialization to conjure up a world of ‘vital relations’ (McKinnon and Cannell 2013b) that are deeply entangled with the contexts of producing and sustaining value, both in—but also, and importantly, beyond—firms and factories.

The materialization of kinship and economy leads several of these articles back to classic insights of anthropological studies of value, where the circulation of objects through social worlds transforms value and reproduces communities (Munn 1986; Weiner 1980). A central theme of the contributions by Gabriel Tusinski, Andrew Johnson, and Caroline Schuster is the importance of the binding ties of obligation in articulating relatedness through exchange practices, from betel leaves to offerings for Thai spirits to microfinance loan payments. Building outward from Tusinski’s insight that “the preservation or destruction of *matter* matters profoundly” with regard to Timorese social attachment and obligation to houses of origin, we find a common set of questions around the specific materializations of obligation, especially as these obligations are buttressed or blunted by moving matter. Johnson focuses on claims of obligation as a strategy for Thai spirit devotees to fix mutuality and thereby render “both themselves and the destructive forces that these spirits represent less *theuan* [wild].”

These entanglements of life-course and obligation align with classic studies of value and its limits or ‘border fetishisms’ (Spyer 1998), including the pathways of Marx’s coat and his family china to the pawnshop and back (Stallybrass 1998), or the cyclical shifting of credit and debt in Schuster’s concept of ‘bicycling loans’. The articles in this special section highlight the importance of objects of value for studies of kinship more generally, illuminating how objects themselves constitute the material media through which generational interconnectedness is viscerally experienced in the form of ‘inalienable possessions’ (Weiner 1992). This collection makes an intervention into studies of economy and kinship focused on social organization by invoking a world where both kinship and economy contain objects that are “agent[s] of ongoing relationality

rather than [objects] for appropriation and alienation through exchange” (Chu 2010: 168), elaborating the possibilities and perils of those material agencies.

Perceptions of (in)appropriate connections between the economic and the affective shape the interpersonal politics of certain kinds of relatedness. In other words, some kin relations are cast with suspicion—and even outrage—when shaped by particular productive and accumulative powers. The ‘purchase of intimacy’ (Zelizer 2000, 2005) has deep roots, despite public anxieties regarding the mixing of affect and money in the contemporary West (Zelizer 2010). Here, we join a long tradition of feminist approaches that challenge models of economy and intimacy that return again and again to interpretations “in which the world of the household, kinship, and ‘non-capitalist’ institutions are radically different in their forms of sociality from the world of the market” (Bear et al. 2015). The many configurations of intimacy and economy through kinship relatedness are richly explored in this collection. Susan McKinnon draws our attention to how cousin marriage, once valued as a “key institution in the consolidation of ... political and economic capital,” became the focus of moralizing and medicalizing discourses in a social and political climate that embraced democratic ideals. Like the “in-and-in breeding” of livestock, which was understood by some commentators as both ‘unnatural’ and improperly motivated by finance, evaluations of cousin marriage were also shaped by perceptions that affinal ties and biological procreation should be distanced from financial motives. This ‘hostile worlds’ view (Zelizer 2000) similarly shapes the social valuation of adoption in Japan. As Kathryn Goldfarb illustrates, potential adoptive parents in Japan are often negatively evaluated if it is perceived that their desire to adopt may be motivated by instrumental gain. The interconnectedness of kinship and the consolidation of capital—economic or human—shape the politics of relatedness. These productive powers bring into relief the social labor at the heart of situating kinship ‘properly’ vis-à-vis economic interdependencies, a point Schuster highlights in her analysis of microcredit clients working to determine appropriate affective and financial units for the repayment of debt.

By focusing on materiality, these articles take up classic questions of obligation in economic anthropology, drawing connections between the unruly materiality of objects and the complex conditions of relatedness wrought through exchange. Bringing renewed attention to the foundational work of Marcel Mauss in *The Gift*, Jane Guyer (2012) has rethought the forms of obligation that exceed the contractual compulsion to repay a gift. Guyer writes of “the attenuation, in Mauss’s account, of the power of ‘obligation’ to set precise conditions of repayment. Gift is temporal, but flexibly so, depending on events and on how the thing itself ‘strives’” (ibid.: 495). The articles in this collection hold in view the indeterminacies of material objects (Keane 2008) in their various ‘strivings’, as well as the kin relations “haunted by difference” (Goldfarb, this issue) and boundary making. Taken together, these pieces offer an answer to Guyer’s (2012: 498) provocation: “Can we still define and re-experience obligation as mutuality, especially when the ... things of the world are no longer animated enough to bind people to each other?” The authors in this collection do so in a way that challenges a straightforward understanding of mutuality

in kinship and exchange relations by revisiting the conditions and contexts of obligation and insisting on the forms of alterity, exclusion, and non-mutuality at the center of these claims of binding ties.

Why Materiality? The Semiotics of Material Life

We draw attention to the ways in which material signs are a productive focus for scholars attending to relatedness in day-to-day interactions between humans, non-humans, and other material things. The articles by Tusinski and Goldfarb in this special section explicitly elaborate the utility of semiotics for anthropological approaches to kinship. Compellingly, Tusinski argues that while David Schneider's focus on the symbolic—one type of sign—has provoked durable and important theoretical insights into kinship, the symbolic is only one aspect of social life and semiotic analysis, and it is perhaps not best suited to elaborate the sorts of emergent and contingent relationships so productively explored within current kinship studies. In fact, focusing on materiality through a semiotic framework may be just what the field of 'new kinship studies' needs to develop its own theorization of kinship, independent of Schneider's persistent influence.

Tusinski and Goldfarb situate their articles in conversation with anthropological scholarship rooted in the semiotic framework of C. S. Peirce, much of which has focused on the material embodiment of qualities and the materiality of causal, indexical connections (see, e.g., Chumley and Harkness 2013; Keane 1997, 2003; Munn 1986; Silverstein 2004). The work of Rupert Stasch, in particular, is highly relevant to this set of articles. Stasch (2009) locates his work on kinship among the Korowai of West Papua within the field of linguistic pragmatics, focusing on how culturally and historically specific sign use orients the ways that people understand social relationships. Stasch's analysis attends specifically to materiality as "communicative media" (ibid.: 16). This includes gifts, caregiving actions, bodily connections, movement practices, dwellings, and land use, all of which are contingent, are situated specifically in space and time, and point toward past and future relationships. Tellingly, Stasch argues that social relatedness is known among the Korowai most centrally through the idiom of otherness. Tusinski's and Goldfarb's contributions take up Stasch's terminology, arguing that theorists should consider kinship as a 'reflexive sensibility' with which individuals interpret the material and causal forces that bind people to each other. Goldfarb (this issue) terms this semiotic framework "kinship technologies" to highlight the contingent and intentional linkages people mobilize in their experiences of interpersonal relationships. She further suggests that transformations in the ways that materiality signifies align with transformations in kinship practices. From Tusinski's analysis of ancestral houses (and the betel nuts taken from them) as tracing the causal and spatio-temporal links between places and people to Goldfarb's exploration of the differential value of adoptive kinship relationships as rooted in similarity and proximity, these articles contribute to semiotic theorizations of materiality within the field of 'new kinship studies'.

While not written from a semiotic perspective, the other articles in this special section reinforce the productive potential of a semiotic analysis of materiality for kinship studies. Schuster's analysis of 'solidarity' within microcredit borrowing groups examines the hard social work of determining the boundaries of the group for the purposes of repaying debts beyond death. The material objects that appear in her analysis—a gifted blanket or the coins placed on the body of a dead child—might be thought of in a semiotic framing as tracing not only group boundaries but also future possibilities for reproducing both children and borrowing groups. Microfinance lending groups—like family—could well be considered 'shifters' (Silverstein 1976), whose boundaries and constituencies change depending on interpersonal politics and the situatedness of social actors (Irvine and Gal 2000). Also in this collection, Johnson elaborates on the affirmative social power of the linguistic action of 'naming' a source of violence or wildness in order to domesticate it: relations of reciprocity with dangerous spirits are both presupposed and entailed in decisions to become kin with spirits. Finally, McKinnon illustrates the ways in which marriage norms and perceptions of similarity (the grouping of people as a certain 'kind') have shifted historically and in alignment with changing views guiding the interpretation of "temperaments or humors," theories that were used to understand the human body and hierarchically arranged social relationships. The metaphoric language of bodily and relational harmony brings to mind Povinelli's (2002) analysis of kinship forms that may (not) be incorporated into the body politic, as well as Silverstein's (2013) discussion of how Worora people locate kinship relationships on the body. A semiotic analysis of the material media of everyday life productively furthers culturally and historically nuanced explorations of kinship and relatedness.

Most significantly, all the articles in this collection address the patterned specificities and the inherent contingencies of human perceptions of relatedness while analyzing the temporalities of material media and their unstable indexicalities for social ties (be it a betel nut, a winter blanket, photographs of parents and children, a Thai-style silk dress, or bodily humors). The authors elaborate the ways in which the meanings ascribed to material things are always already richly situated in place and time. Even 'universal' things such as the human body 'express' meaning differently in different situations, depending on what signs are attended to and on what characteristics are taken as signs in the first place (Goldfarb 2010; Keane 1997; Kuriyama 2002). This special section explores the ways that otherness and sameness are perceived within often highly embodied logics of relatedness, resulting in potentially powerful political and interpersonal consequences.

In Conclusion: Holding Together Mutuality and Difference

By critically engaging with theories of mutuality that ask 'what kinship is' (Sahlins 2011a, 2011b, 2013), these articles come to surprising conclusions about alterity. At stake is an analytic vocabulary for kinship studies that can grapple with mutuality and difference, as they are inextricably linked in logics of

relatedness. Rather than presuming an identity of similarity, we build non-mutuality into the comparative frame itself. Notably, our attention to difference as a key factor for understanding kinship is an old preoccupation, given anthropology's history of theorizing kinship as precisely a systematic interplay between similarity and difference, between self and other, parsing those who are too similar to marry from those incorporable as marriage partners (see McKinnon, this issue)—a process that, in turn, has long been understood to produce lasting hierarchies and inequalities. In this way, “kinship is a specific human way of establishing a system of differences, of cutting the network of possible connections ... into determinate relationships” (Fausto 2013: 295). Difference thus lives at the heart of kinship, enabling productive, dangerous, and pleasurable forms of identification and non-identification, mutuality and disassociation.

By exploring kinship through the lens of material practice, we open up new possibilities for critical engagement with theories of value, semiotics, and difference. An attention to materiality simultaneously destabilizes and recontextualizes an anthropological focus on biogenetic ‘substance’ (Carsten 2004) and reframes materiality as being subject to the vicissitudes of caring or neglectful interpersonal relationships, time, death, and violence. Kinship ties are, in many ways, semiotically mediated through daily engagement with material bodies and non-human objects and entities. This perspective maintains a focus on the ways that relationships themselves are always already subject to semiotic regimes that guide interpretations of what is—and is not—an interpersonal tie and that are also creatively engaged with and modified by human actors (Keane 2003; Stasch 2009). Running through these several approaches is a concern for the durable asymmetries and exclusions that emerge from value-making projects (Cattellino 2008) and the ways that representations of mutuality and similarity contribute to conceptual and political boundary making (Irvine and Gal 2000; McKinnon and Cannell 2013a).

Each of these articles articulates the peril of taking mutuality for granted in kinship relations. Close attention to material differences at the heart of relationality draws into relief social hierarchies, national (dis)identification, debt forgiveness and perduring obligations, loss and abandonment, (in)visible markers of otherness, and the threat of violence—all of which theorize the matter of politics and value. In this special section, McKinnon's analysis of cousin marriage in the United States considers how valued and devalued marriage unions were located on a terrain of race and class-inflected difference, linking kinship ideologies to beliefs regarding the evolutionary status of America vis-à-vis other countries. Understandings of similarity and otherness within kinship relationships thus reflected and bolstered social hierarchies. Goldfarb offers a complementary analysis that portrays the yearning for durable relational ties in Japanese adoption and foster care. She shows how some embodied expressions of mutuality such as “physical similarity and caring proximity” subtly reinforce a politics of exclusion, particularly along family and ethnic lines. In Schuster's analysis of microcredit groups dealing with the death of a borrower and repayment of a loan, struggles over incorporating difference were precisely what made the vexed and ongoing ‘solidarities’ of dead borrowers such a powerful

site of social regeneration, in contrast to the straightforward heteronormative mutuality of the microfinance organization's life insurance payout. Johnson elaborates how social precarity requires people to ally with dangerous forces. These various others are sources of power and potential that must be incorporated as kin, lest they overpower one. In this way, kinship domesticates the other in order to hold it at bay (see also Rutherford 2003). Tusinski illustrates how the dead are key members of social worlds, but kinship connections across the divide of death depend on the continued existence of material structures and objects threatened by political instability. By expanding our focus beyond the 'mutuality of being' underlying some—but certainly not all—kinship experiences, these articles reveal the historically and culturally contingent ways in which kinship is materialized and dematerialized, as people negotiate both similarity and difference in daily life.

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Notes

1. This conversation is well underway with a number of scholars in anthropology, whose research appears in collections such as *Vital Relations*, edited by Susan McKinnon and Fenella Cannell (2013b). Marshall Sahlins's (2013) *What Kinship Is—And Is Not* has elicited a number of responses (see Brightman 2013; Fausto 2013; Robbins 2013; cf. Pina-Cabral 2013). Elsewhere, the 'Gens collective' has revived classic discussions in feminist anthropology on kinship, reproduction, and value production (cf. Bear et al. 2015).
2. For diverse methodological and conceptual approaches to materiality, see, for instance, Alaimo and Hekman (2008b), Barad (2007), Bennett (2010), Coole and Frost (2010), Keane (2003), and Miller (2005).
3. This is a matter that the editors of *Material Feminisms* deal with explicitly in their analysis of the "new ethical and political vistas" (Alaimo and Hekman 2008a: 7) opened up by refocusing on questions concerning agencies of bodies and natures. While we broadly agree that material ethics allows us as analysts to compare "the very real material consequences of ethical positions" (ibid.), we suggest that the conditions of constraint and inequality that are produced by particular social practices—including forms of relatedness—are rendered less visible by this intentional and agential frame.

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