

INTRODUCTION

To Bind and To Bound: Commensuration Across Boundaries

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ABSTRACT

This introductory essay charts the analytic potential of a concept of commensuration that goes beyond issues of metrics per se, but without diffusing itself into a general metaphor for cultural difference. Commensuration, we argue, is not just a basic psychosocial process, but has also emerged, in the context of “globalization” with its multifarious and wide-ranging flows, as an ideological value in its own right. Explicit negotiations of commensuration, then, have become increasingly fraught, increasingly pivotal practices as group boundaries of all sorts—separating ethnic groups, socioeconomic classes, nations, or “civilizations”—are relentlessly re-erected and re-arranged on the miniscule ethnographic scale of everyday engagements with semiotic forms marked as coming from beyond those boundaries. After laying out the nuts and bolts of our approach, we explore commensuration (and introduce the subsequent collection of essays) via three topical foci: commensuration’s role in securing movement as a semiotic effect; how sovereign power authorizes commensuration and thus comes to be at stake in it; and, finally, the destabilizing and yet productive ways in which failure haunts commensurative projects. [Keywords: Commensuration, boundaries, circulation, authority, failure]

Standing on the steps outside the Turkish Parliament, hemmed in by a small mob of reporters, a man raises high a combative fist. Clenched in it is a thick red tome. The man is a Member of Parliament from the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party, and the book he wields makes his point materially: our language is as good as yours; our dictionary is just as thick.

On a billboard above a currency exchange business at the US–Mexico border, a row of US Presidents—cut out from the dollar bills on which they circulate—faces off against a row of analogous figures, the founding fathers (and one mother) of the Mexican nation, likewise drawn from that country’s paper currency. Below, the pun: “Looking for best guys/rates of exchange? We’ve got ’em!”

Outside a camping store in an upscale shopping mall in Beijing, a delicate Chinese tea set perches atop a rugged collapsible table. Elsewhere, Eastern and Western are set up precisely as irreconcilable; here, masculinity emerges from their clashing strangeness as a common denominator.

For their solidarity trip to South India, seven members of the Japanese Buraku minority group have spent months preparing stories of their experiences of social marginalization to share with their Dalit counterparts. But now, face to face with them at last, they can only sit in stunned silence: how can snubs from employers and marriage partners, however painful, compare with these graphic tales of beatings, rapes, and even the Dalits’ own violent acts of retribution?

From classic struggles for recognition by ethnic minorities within the nation-state to routine negotiations of national and economic value along one of the world’s most unequal international borders, from the arresting civilizational juxtapositions brought about by global modernity’s material culture to contemporary attempts to build transnational solidarity from below, these four vignettes doubtless speak to very disparate issues. But they also involve, at a basic level, similar gestures of “measuring up” across social, cultural, political, and economic boundaries. In Jamison’s essay in this collection, Kurdish political claims come down to an all-too-literal weighing of words against words; in Yeh’s, the equivalence of value of national pasts is in play in the everyday exchange of pesos and dollars.

The marketing ploy taken from Chumley's piece depends on the delicate alignment of East and West embodied in tea set and camping table, and, in Hankins's essay, the project to establish solidarity between Japanese and Indian activists hinges on the ability to represent "discrimination" as being roughly similar across two national contexts. These vignettes, we suggest, highlight a common process of *commensuration*.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* marks the term as obsolete, but, in academic circles at least, it has been making a comeback in recent years. As a fundamental psychosocial practice implicated in the most basic human acts of classification, commensuration involves the adequation of objects taken in the first instance as distinct in nature. It hinges on judgments of similarity in the face of essential difference, the two held in tension with each other and yet of a piece, and it is, thus, wrapped up in the production of borders and boundaries of all sorts. The activist's assertion that Kurdish is as valid as Turkish relies on a presumption that the two are different; differences between tea set and camping table announce an underlying similarity in masculinities. Just as Simmel (1994) long ago pointed out, it is not the case that bridges and doors connect while walls bound: walls also bind, as bridges mark boundaries. An assertion of similarity simultaneously presumes a difference to be overcome, and likewise, an assertion of difference rises into view against assumptions of similarity. While commensuration plays a fundamental role in human cognition, however, explicit negotiations of commensuration have become increasingly loaded and even pivotal—politically, economically, socially—with the contemporary transformations most usually glossed as "globalization." Commensuration has itself, in this world, become an ideological value, and it is above all in the effort to grasp the global capitalist moment that *commensuration* as a term has come back into currency.

There are other uses of the word, of course, from mathematics and physics to ethics and beyond, but in the social sciences, two sharply divergent senses of *commensuration* have been most influential. On the one hand, commensuration has been used to focus attention on the problem of quantification, on how this or that can be reduced to a measure, on how standards are, always failingly, imposed. This strand of research gained impetus from Espeland and Stevens's (1998) touchstone essay, which takes commensuration's etymological root as the starting point for inquiry into the creation and application of standardized metrics of all sorts. Though the literature has widened its scope, it still hews closely to this

original focus. In anthropology, the main subfields availing themselves of the concept are medicine, law, and economics (cf. Pigg 2001, Rock 2005, Maurer 2006, Li 2011); if this is so, it is because all of them prominently involve the use of instruments that, as John and Jean Comaroff note of law, appear to offer “a repertoire of standardized signs and practices that... permit the negotiation of values and interests across otherwise intransitive lines of difference” (2009:37).

On the other hand, *incommensurability* has played an important part in politico-philosophical debates on radical difference, rational debate as a method for reducing conflict and harmonizing opinion, and the outer limits of Western universality and democratic practice.¹ This approach begins with Kuhn and Feyerabend’s opening, in the 1960s, of debate in the philosophy of science—though it is at heart a debate on language and translation.² The two approaches—the creation and diffusion of standards versus issues of cultural, political, and linguistic difference—both evidently focus in on problems integral to globalization, but they do so in very different ways. Each approach has its pros and cons. Standardized metrics are indisputably crucial in tracking the nitty-gritties of practices of accounting and of calculative reason on which capitalism’s expansion rides, but restricting *commensuration* to such quantitative concerns renders the term inapt for discussing larger questions of the rub of contrasting (world)views. This second usage, however, runs the risk of becoming entirely metaphorical, extending the term’s generality to the point that the concept is denuded of its empirical and theoretical powers of purchase.

When it comes to the big issues of cultural contact and radical difference, moreover, *translation* is a well-established rubric that might seem to cover the same terrain (especially considering the philosophical debate on incommensurability was all about translation). Why replace it? In the first place, because most of the time it, too, provides but a metaphorical grasp on things that imports particular prejudices (that of translation as “loss,” for instance) to the discussion at hand.³ In the second place, because the split between translation, as germane to debates on linguistic and cultural difference, and commensuration, as proper to ostensibly more material and economic flows, reproduces the old division between realms of language and of economy that, as myriad studies have shown, are in fact inseparable (Irvine 1989, Keane 2003, Manning

2006).⁴ However powerful a concept translation has proven, commensuration offers a new and hardly explored theoretical purchase that, without losing its distinctiveness, may prove productive far beyond questions of measurement in any literal sense. A definition is needed at once more expansive and more precise than the term's use heretofore has implied. In an effort to move toward such a definition, and keeping in mind our opening vignettes, the following section develops an approach to commensuration in terms of *drawing proportions*—that is, establishing a structural relation, more essentially qualitative than quantitative, not just between two terms but between pairs of them. As the *OED* notes, commensuration is “the act of proportioning.” In the vignettes above, for instance, masculinity only emerges as a universal in the parallel between the way tea set and camping table index Eastern and Western versions of the same; the Kurdish claim to equal rights arrives in an assertion that Kurdish is for Kurds what Turkish is for Turks. It is this assertion of proportionality that sets up boundaries with the promise of equalizing what lies on either side of them.

As a practice of drawing proportions, of judging proportional similarities, commensuration is always an achievement; it must, in Paul Kockelman's terms, be both “poetically shown” and “dynamically performed” (n.d.:2), with wide-ranging effects. In this collection, we examine commensuration as productive of movement, subject to authoritative ratification, and vulnerable to the possibility of failure. After developing our approach to commensuration as proportional, we open discussion along just these three avenues: the cultural labor of commensuration required to effect movement across boundaries; the role of authority and standards in securing such movement; and the chronic and constitutive issue of failure and disruption in this busy traffic. Each of the four ethnographic essays included in this collection—foreshadowed by the four vignettes above—explores these three aspects of commensuration to gain analytic traction on an expanding and increasingly weighty set of practices whereby boundaries of all sorts can be set up and traversed in the very same move. Ethnic groups and nations are both enclosed and porous; languages leak in their standardization; and objects and currencies exchange one into the other. Our investigations seek to make sense of these moves in the sometimes contestatory, sometimes normalizing work of comparison and judgment that commensuration entails.

Ping and Pong: Proportionality

In a passage to which Marx is famously indebted, Aristotle writes, “Money...serves as a measure which makes things commensurable and so reduces them to equality. If there were no exchange there would be no association, and there can be no exchange without equality, and no equality without commensurability” (1926:287). *Association*, in this passage, should be understood in its fullest sense. Just a few pages earlier, Aristotle notes that “the very existence of the state” depends upon exchange, for “it is exchange that binds [men] together” (1926:281). The simple operation of commensuration thus stands, for him, at the basis of the entire possibility of human society.

Commensuration, here, is clearly a calculative matter, but not just in the numeric sense that money implies. Aristotle is writing about justice, and though in the above passage he focuses on the circulation of commodities, he has in mind a much broader sense of the crucial “goods” that, as they move, depend upon commensuration in order to bind society together. Whether a matter of honor, money, or security, Aristotle says, justice neither seeks gain nor shies from loss. If justice is “a sort of mean” (1926:269), that mean is not numerical but proportional, for proportion is a property of anything “admitting of more and less,” even if it cannot be measured with the exactitude of numbers. Thus physical harm has a more and a less, and a mean somewhere in the middle that allows different harms to be balanced and, even, shares of it to be allotted. To reassign such shares, whether of pain or profit, is the job of the judge.

Proportionality, however, is not simply a matter of finding a mid-point between more and less. To make equal, to restore the balance, the judge must weigh not only the difference in shares (a complicated enough matter on its own), but the parties to the dispute themselves. What is just for one may not be just for the other, and so “it follows...that justice involves at least four terms,” the relation of which may be concisely represented by a simple equation: $A/C = B/D$, or, to use Aristotle’s own example, farmer : food :: shoemaker : shoe (1926:285). Such an equation is, of course, what is known as a “proportional equation.”

Given the equality of farmer and shoemaker, money can easily equalize their correspondent products. The proportional equation, however, introduces the possibility that the farmer is not equal to the shoemaker, so that in such a case, the quantities of food and shoes exchanged must be adjusted accordingly. Kockelman’s (n.d.:19) example is that of knave to

knight, and indeed Aristotle's system here is deeply concerned with social inequality. As a proportional equation, commensuration keeps knave and knight in their separate stations, even as it allows the passage of goods between them. It holds firm the social boundary at the same time that it draws together, by exchange and circulation, that which lies on either side.

Farmer and shoemaker, however, do not move us any closer to understanding how Aristotle's "more and less" could be in practice anything but quantitative; in the case of shoes and food, an ultimate concrete measure of goods would seem inevitably to mediate the less readily calculable social difference between the parties. Historically, too, the problem of commensuration in justice precisely gave rise to torture in 17th and 18th century Europe as a "quantitative art" (Foucault 1977:34). The art historian E.H. Gombrich, we believe, provides a playful clue pointing us in a different direction. "It was Professor Roman Jakobson," he writes, "who drew my attention to the fact that synesthesia concerns relationships" (1959:314). To try out the suggestion, he invented a simple "party game":

It consists of creating the simplest imaginable medium in which relationships can still be expressed, a language of two words only—let us call them "ping" and "pong." If these were all we had and we had to name an elephant and a cat, which would be ping and which pong? I think the answer is clear. (1959:314)

Gombrich elaborates ping and pong into a veritable principle of human perception. He is working with the same four-part equation as Aristotle: ping is to pong as cat is to elephant, or as ice cream is to soup. What is important is not that these things "really" go together in any perduring way (obviously, they do not), but the ease and automaticity with which partygoers (or book readers) respond. Behind the trivial correspondences of the party game, Gombrich shows a basic process of analogic calquing, a potentially infinite chain of culturally formed intuitions so deeply felt as to appear instinctive, beginning, in his first "serious" example, with the play between the series light–dark, high–low, and good–evil.⁵

Besides synaesthesia, however, what is at stake in the matching of cat to ping and elephant to pong is also an evaluative comparison.⁶ The synaesthetic equation holds cat and elephant separate even as it places them in relation to each other upon a minimal scale, the two extremes

of which are “ping” and “pong.” This is the judgment at stake in proportionality, that stands at the root of Aristotle’s “more and less”—not a quantitative evaluation at all, but simply the qualitative judgment that the cat is more ping and less pong, the elephant more pong and less ping.⁷ The process of commensuration here begins with the qualitative assessment of difference along an asserted dimension of similarity. To carry it further, one might indeed have to ask how much ping it would take to make a pong; faced with that question, one might press forward to attempt a quantification. Or one might retreat with an admission of incommensurability, having decided that ping and pong do not after all lie upon a common scale but are of utterly different nature. In this collection, we want to put our finger ethnographically on that point where the demand to commensurate across a qualitative divide emerges—even, sometimes, in thoroughly quantified areas of existence.⁸

Standing between the two sides of the equation, the judge must make them commensurate. In Aristotle’s original Greek, he makes them, in fact, symmetrical (though in context it clearly refers to framing things within the same system of measure, the word *commensurability* translated is *σύμμετρα*). In this operation, his first step is abstraction, the isolation of one quality, the winnowing of it from all the rest: pingness and pongness, say, to follow through on Gombrich; or masculinity, to take up our third opening example. The sensuous overflowing of experienced objects or events must be reduced to a single dimension of contrast and comparability upon which the terms in question may be located.⁹ Even in the classic case of commodities to be exchanged, it is just this exchangeability that must be brought into focus to the exclusion of all else, even when this “all else” (the material qualities that make the commodity’s use value) is in fact what motivates the exchange in the first place. Only then may food and shoes be judged to be more or less; only then may quantity come into the picture and the four terms be lined up two and two, wiggled together to make a (just for Aristotle, pleasurable for Gombrich) correspondence.

Let us summarize. First, Aristotle’s focus on commensuration as a judgment of proportional correspondences gives us a precise but basic sense of how boundaries come to be at stake in commensuration; the four-term proportional equation implies that behind any two objects compared, two other entities are also being sized up. This shadowing effect is basic in all the essays gathered here—it is how the categorical boundaries immediately involved in commensuration (tea sets versus camping tables, say)

can become so deeply political.¹⁰ Second, proportionality provides the basis for a concept of commensuration not reducible to measurement per se, though it lies at the root of that. The scales of evaluation can be formalized, by degrees, all the way from the openness of ping and pong to metrics proper, which likewise work by isolating a single aspect—weight, length—for comparative evaluation. Commensuration begins, we contend, at the point where simple comparison gives way to the imperative to equalize, to make things measure up. In this effort, number is often emergent, but it is not necessarily the defining factor of the process.

The following sections work out a series of points suggested by our discussion of Aristotle. Picking up on his focus on how “goods” can bind a society by their circulation, we start off with the problem of movement and the labor of commensuration that goes into effecting it. Building on Simmel’s insight, we stress the ways that movement is instrumental in delimiting social groups even as things move across their boundaries. Next, we explore the role of the judge, that is, of the third parties that adjudicate and authorize commensuration. Finally, we turn to the possibility of failure, of things not lining up, of the judges’ faltering, and the ways in which this failure can be both menacing and productive. In each section, we focus on the micro-mechanics of commensuration for the light they throw on the sociopolitical issues at stake in them.

Movement

Examining the circulations that constitute capitalist modernity, Lee and LiPuma argue that circulation is never simply a matter of transmission; rather, it is an act of creation, “a cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint” (2002:192). Of these three, the first depends on commensuration, and the last two are fundamentally given in it.¹¹ To understand how, let us begin, as Lee and LiPuma do, with a semiotic understanding of circulation that challenges longstanding conceptual divisions between the economic and the cultural or discursive.

“What is circulation?” Susan Gal (2007) asks:

Persons may circulate by moving bodily from place to place, as at a party or in migration. Objects may circulate by being moved or exchanged from person to person, as gift, commodity, or entitlement. But signs, messages and practices—discursive activity—only *seem*

to move in this way....[W]hat we perceive as “movement” is more precisely a repetition or imitation of forms that are framed, *reflexively and in retrospect*, as being “the same thing, again” or as instantiations of an ideal, a genre: a sonnet, a wedding.

Gal’s paper develops a semiotic approach to what she calls the “new economy,” often captioned in terms of “globalization” or the rise of the “transnational” and characterized by the intensified speed and density of interconnections between people in places far removed. In doing so, she builds on a long-standing inquiry within linguistic anthropology on how texts move (Agha and Wortham 2005, Bauman and Briggs 1990, Briggs and Bauman 1992, Gal 2003, Silverstein and Urban 1996). Rather than taking up metaphors of “flows” or “scapes” (Appadurai 1996), “friction” (Tsing 2005), “networks” (Castells 1996, Riles 2000), or older terminology of “micro” or “macro” (Goffman 1959), Gal instead elaborates the notion of “interdiscursivity”—that is, semiosis across encounters (cf. Silverstein 2005)—as a way to provide a better grasp of contemporary communicative interconnection. Part of what interdiscursivity brings to the table is its nature as an achievement; imaginaries of “circulation” must be projected from chains of interdiscursive links, one event calibrated to the next to create the effect of movement.¹² Interdiscursivity allows us to ask what kind of labor, and what kinds of felicity conditions, go into the seemingly simple recognition of any semiotic object as “the same thing, again.”¹³

In the passage above, Gal treats the movement of people and objects as self-evident in its physicality. But the recognition of their movement, based on their apparent continuous self-sameness, should not be taken for granted either. To begin with, and as influentially pointed out by Irvine (1989), people, objects, and strips of discourse or interaction are categories of things not as clearly distinct as they might at first seem. Discursive activity may be concretized in text artifacts, physical objects subject to all the vagaries their material nature opens. Likewise, discourse is itself key in the ongoing characterization of people and objects. The lines between these categories blur, inviting the application of the analytic armature of interdiscursivity beyond the realm it was invented to describe. The movement of material objects, insofar as it depends on recognition, is as much a semiotic achievement as is the movement of discourse.¹⁴

The movement of an object across a room, currency from one bank to another, words from one site to another, people from one fraught situation

to the next—each of these occurs only with the aid of a set of judgments of similarity bridging the boundaries separating one moment from another. These judgments—that something is indeed “the same thing, again”—are not so different from those of Aristotle’s judge, making things again equal, making them again proportional, making them “the same.” The perception of movement—i.e., the process of overcoming boundaries—as such, we contend, depends on the same basic process of commensuration.¹⁵ Lee and LiPuma’s (2002:192) “evaluations” are commensurative ones, and circulation’s “constraints” may be understood in terms of the limits on judgments of sameness. Commensuration’s key feature vis-à-vis movement, of course, is that it is operational across time and space; as commensuration spans these two, it gives them shape as well.

To follow through on the discussion of proportionality above, however, the judgments that produce movement as a semiotic effect are not simply judgments about the moving object itself. Examinations of circulation in linguistic anthropology build from a focus not just on text per se but rather on the shifting relationship between text and context. Locales, objects, and subject positions are co-constitutive; they emerge in a processual, dialogic fashion. As Gal pithily puts it: “When texts move, both text and context are transformed” (2003:94). Across time and space, then, movement involves two instances of text and context—four terms in all—commensuratively drawn together.¹⁶ It is here that Simmel’s bridge, joining one instance to another, simultaneously asserts a boundary overcome. Through this commensurative labor, movement takes shape as a process of continual transformation, both of the object doing the circulating and the contextually rooted adjudications of that object. In Chumley’s vignette, for instance, even if the camping table is literally made in China, it must “carry” something of the Western contexts that first shaped it as a commercial object; as this physical instance of a camping table encounters the tea set in the novel context of the Beijing mall, the prior contexts of use that each can indexically evoke joggle against one another productively.

Note that while we rely on previous discussions of *circulation*, we prefer to write here of *movement*. This is to avoid circulation’s implication of a movement away and a return; *movement* on its own allows us to start before the totalization or systematicity that a circuit can imply. In the notion of context, totalizations may well be at stake, and in many of the examples gathered here, they are: the nation-state, the ethnic group,

the imperial project. Lee and LiPuma (2002), indeed, focus precisely on the totalizations evoked out of the relationship between circulating forms and the interpretive communities built around them.¹⁷ In the case of the global economy, “the same thing, again” emerges within, and repeatedly evokes, the transnational circuitry that seems to bind texts and contexts, people, objects, discourses into a single massive apparatus of movement within which those other figures of social boundedness must nest (cf. Gal 2003, Povinelli 2006). But these various totalities are by no means given; their construal must struggle to draw together movements that remain, all too often, disparate. Jamison’s essay highlights totalization’s dependency on the more modest processes of commensuration: the attempt to animate a Kurdish public sphere rests on building an intuitive sense of the texture of printed Kurdish as “the same” across a range of text artifacts, not just dictionaries, but newspapers and magazines prominently on display on newsstands. With low literacy rates, however, there is little traction for that commensurative recognition, or for the “we” to which Kurdish activists would have it give substance.¹⁸ By shifting our focus to *movement*, we start from the ground up, to show how social systems, and the bounded human groups implicated in them, are evinced and enforced in fleeting moments of commensurative adjudication.

The semiotic approach to movement provides a methodological orientation, rooted in an analysis of connection among sites of practice, to examine how it is that texts and contexts are negotiated and achieved in interaction. This line builds a strong armature for understanding how current practices performatively establish trajectories so as to shape understandings of similarity and difference across both prior and subsequent arenas of action—how it is that boundaries are made meaningful, and what is necessary to surmount (or commensurate across) those boundaries. We find it necessary too, however, to push this armature beyond its focus on the discursive. Rather than presuming that the physical translocation of people or objects is a self-explanatory phenomenon, we instead contend that similarity, partial repetition, or difference of objects and people is a semiotic achievement as much as similarity, partial repetition, or difference of discursive activity. The movement of a person, as at a party or in migration, or the movement of an object, as in exchange, also relies on semiotic labor to produce people and objects as “the same thing, again.”

Authority

Through a host of micro-judgments of similarity and difference, commensuration underpins the semiotic effect of movement. Relevant qualities are selected and compared; analogies are sketched and rubbed out even in a fleeting glance or gesture. Each of those tiny judgments, however, implies a subject behind it: the agent of decision-making. Recall Aristotle. It is the judge who balances the shares of profit or pain, who weighs the parties involved, who imposes the standard against which the measurement of proportion is possible. At the very fulcrum of commensuration stands his mediating authority.

In Aristotle's terms, the judge precedes commensuration; he stands above and prior to it. But the examples in our collection show that, actually, his authority is risked and vulnerable, made and remade, in every act of commensuration. As the historical metrologist Witold Kula reminds us, the fact that measures are an age-old "attribute of authority" (1986:18) only makes them all the more fervid a field for struggle. Each of the ethnographic glimpses that opened this introduction fundamentally involves the question of the authoritative frames of reference within which things can be judged "the same, again." When street cleaners and activists travel from Tokyo to India to meet with Dalits, they legitimize their claims to solidarity across purportedly similar experiences of oppression by reference to the incipient legal structure of the United Nations. In turn, the authority of that august body is at stake in all the small negotiations and slippages that both afflict and give sense to the Japanese activists' transnational enterprise. So, too, at Mexico's border with the US, where the southern country cannot hold the line (if you will) against the encroachments of dollars, English, and US consumer goods. Given the premises of the territorial nation-state, these semiotic forms are read by many as indices and agents of the day-to-day undermining of Mexican sovereignty.

Movements of whatever sort are stabilized by degrees, thanks to the little *renvois* that anchor them back to institutional authority. We build here on the logic of the baptismal moment as developed by Silverstein (2003b:203-204). As he summarizes what he calls philosophy's "'causal theory' of reference," the use of a name or noun harks back to a presumed foundational "baptism," whereby "an authoritative extending of some object with a word or expression creates a 'prototype' referent" (Silverstein 1996:81). In this sense, words lean back on institutions; they presuppose them, they bear their weight within them. But they also entail and reproduce them. Indeed,

the crucial point for us is not the existence per se of any baptizing authority, but how such foundational authorities may be—must be—“ideologically presumed” (Silverstein 1996:81). The recognition of movement, of “the same thing, again,” likewise tenders an authority in the expectation it will be recognized; there is a little Althusserian hailing within each act of commensuration, however innocent. But conditions will vary under which the ideological presupposition of authority can stick. With the reciprocity of response that hailing implies, one finds different capacities for reproducing authority, and the wiggle room for dispute.

The institutional authorities anchoring commensuration may be of many types, ranging from “tradition” to the nation-state and beyond; they may be legal or monetary, linguistic, ethical, aesthetic, or of any other ilk. They may not be vastly and complexly centralized in the way state authority pretends to be, but given the contemporary global regime that is our focus, the nation-state necessarily emerges as a principal realm that to an extraordinary extent has succeeded in centering upon itself the “regimes of value” (Appadurai 1986) regimenting movements of all sorts. Though they are by no means absent elsewhere, state efforts to marshal or stymie all sorts of flows have been legend at its territorial boundaries. Here, it may be easy to foist upon commensuration the sort of bad rap it has long had: always on the side of power, always on the side of the creeping extension of hegemony.¹⁹ Such disposition to serve as a tool of domination may well be borne out by the ethnographic evidence. Interest groups on both sides of the US–Mexico border, for instance, have long decried their governments’ incomprehension of everyday imbrications across the border, their attempts to mandate commensurative rubrics from above. But the picture is more complex. As Chumley reminds us, nation-states rely, too, on a far more fundamental claim to absolute incommensurability with the essences of other peoples. In such a context, where authority rests more on authenticity than on control over the objectivity of judgment, it is commensuration that may emerge as radical.

Behind the judge stands the law; behind the law, the sovereign. At least it is so in the tradition of the nation-state. But in commensuration, we contend, lies one of sovereignty’s most routine tripping-stones. To be sovereign is to be radically incommensurable, “to stand above the fray,” as Danilyn Rutherford (2012:4) puts it. She focuses on stagings of sovereignty that highlight its denied dependence on an audience—and how that dependence confers on the audiences themselves a kind of sovereignty. As

an even subtler site where sovereignty risks itself to gain recognition, commensuration too drags the sovereign down into its realm of prolific homologies. The sovereign should stand above, authorizing commensuration from an entirely different plane of being, but it, too, is ultimately commensurable with the interlocutors on which it depends—to start off, other sovereign states with their diplomatic recognition.

The logic of the standard, so often a technique of sovereignty, speaks directly to this tension between commensuration and incommensuration. It is also, of course, one of the main forms in which commensuration today has become a value virtually in and of itself. For a quick and dirty sense of its particularity, think of the difference between a set of calipers and a ruler. With calipers, one holds them up to an object, takes a measurement, and then holds them up to a second object. The ruler, in contrast, replicates an absolute standard of measurement; with every use, it harks back not just to some generalized social agreement, but to an entire institutional apparatus, often, unsurprisingly, part of the state itself. As the baptismal theory of reference cited above implies, however, authoritative thirds (rulers of measurement as of peoples) must actually jack themselves up out of a series of lateral calibrations: in this case, one ruler matched against another all the way back to the prototype.

As a commensurative tool, standards trace various sorts of boundaries at once. First off, by designating the relevant quality and scale of comparison, they establish independent ambits of commensurability, realms of things purportedly equalizable at least along whatever one dimension may be at stake: weight is one problem, hue another. Standards also, however, set up hierarchies of discrepancy, of variance from a sanctified norm. Within such a regime, mobility is closely tied to conformity; where the standard applies, the judgment of sameness securing movement seems to snap into place automatically. Think of William Cronon's (1991) classic history of 19th century Chicago's grain elevators, lumber-yards, and meat-packing plants, a history of how the expanding capitalist economy of the city absorbed the rural hinterlands told through the steps (some tiny, some momentous) whereby commodities flowing in from the countryside were standardized, lumped together into different grades that could be traded on an entirely different scale. The trend towards commensurability has not diminished; quantification applies just as much to such elusive elements of commodity value as affect and sociability itself, which have become increasingly important on the market. Guatemalan villagers wishing to get in

on the ecotourism trade, for instance, must show the NGO facilitating this that they are prepared to regulate their interaction with tourists according to a very specific set of rules: “walk with tourists on trail, no more than five paces ahead...take at least two five minute breaks; talk with tourists four times during the hike” (Kockelman 2006:78). Through this kind of micro-management, the standard establishes a new model of social being within the village, one commensurate with ecotourism.

The way in which standards of measurement smooth some flows while stopping others parallels a conundrum often noted of standardized languages, which appeal to what Kroskrity (2000:8) calls “a modern metric of communicative efficiency.” The emphasis on transparent reference is itself an ideological enshrinement of commensurability: languages imagined to be absolutely adequate to the objectual world should, by the same logic, be easily adequate amongst each other. Again, the logic of the standard erects a whole system of complex and intertwined boundaries. On the one hand, behind the emphasis on creating a zone of homogeneity, on articulating a position supposedly democratically available to every citizen, standardized languages actually create a hierarchy among speakers; in practice, they become “embodiments of...state-endorsed social inequality” (Kroskrity 2000:28). On the other hand, no in-betweens are tolerated here—lines between languages must be firmed up and made definite, and the logic of the standard immediately creates a grading effect among standardized languages themselves. Which can claim the powerful, utilitarian grasp of truly transparent reference? The complex imbrication of these supra- and subnational boundaries becomes especially evident in loaded contexts of colonialism, migration, and minority rights, as the essays here explore.

With the various interlocked boundaries they trace, standards are part and parcel of the ways in which the authorities behind them are poised between commensuration and incommensuration, erecting themselves out of the circulatory processes they would regiment.²⁰ Standards provide a ready-made frame of reference that welds the authorities in question more firmly to the interaction, at the same time providing an evident avenue for flouting those same authorities. They tend to build the renvoi in, and thus to make commensuration overtly an act in which authority is at stake. But like the authorities implicated in them, standards are finally but infinitely receding ideals towards which actors may, given constraints, orient—in different ways, to different extents, or not at all.

Failure

As soon as a standard is held aloft, there are any number of ways not to measure up. In face of commensuration's multifarious effects, contestation and vulnerability flourish, authority is challenged, and standards are made and remade. Acts of commensuration are known as much through their misfires as their successes. Even when authority succeeds, even when standards work, in setting up commensuration or in asserting a fundamental incommensurability there is a risk of failure, a failure that can be fecund.

In a basement outside Paris, under three nested bell jars in an environmentally monitored safe in a vault requiring three independently controlled keys to enter, sits a cylinder of platinum and iridium. This cylinder is hard, twice as dense as lead, extremely resistant to oxidation, with a low magnetic susceptibility. It is the international prototype kilogram (IPK), and, along with its six sister copies, is maintained by the International Bureau of Weights and Measures. Further official copies reside in 38 nations around the world, serving as national standards. Every 50 years these dispersed copies are returned to the Bureau for "verification" against the IPK.²¹

The IPK serves as the standard weight against which all other weights in the metric system are measured.²² It is the foundational, abstracted unit, the mass of which is an object of intense scrutiny. As the international prototype, its mass cannot vary; it *is* the standard. However, when subjected to verification, shifts in its mass can be inferred. The extreme lengths to which the metrologists go to minimize these shifts—the environmental controls, the limited access, the particular ratio of platinum to iridium in the alloy, developing new methods to secure the kilogram—all betray an anxiety about the deterioration of the standard that, despite the metrologists' most fervent attempts to keep it at bay, creeps in. For reasons physicists do not completely understand, these shifts, errors, and uncertainties cannot be totally removed. Error takes root the moment the standard is instantiated as a metal cylinder, giving weight to the anxiety that such failures are not external, but rather inherent in the basic presumption that a form can stand abstracted from interaction. As Kockelman puts it, "just as coins wear down and goods spoil, information degrades and reputations wither" (n.d.:27). Abstract standards, however much they seem to stand aloft from the messy sociohistorical fray, are produced in that fray; they live in contestation, risk, and challenge.

In our exploration of commensuration, failure does not simply arise when authority falters or as something is registered as aberrant to the norm;

rather, it is a fundamental part of the process itself. To begin with, abstraction itself brings the possibility of failure, as those qualities set aside surge up to interrupt the process of establishing proportionality. The IPK must be made of something; its mass is bundled with other qualities of the metals, handpicked for their hardness, their density, their durability. But, as a result of other qualities of these metals, the periodic verifications indicate that the IPK ineluctably gains mass. The fact that qualities come in bundles introduces an unknown extra into the commensurative equation that acts back on its process, leaving it open to surprise effects and potential breakdown. This built-in tendency to failure only motivates the metrologists and physicists further in their anxious attempts to abstract away from the bundling of qualities concreteness brings.²³

As the *OED* emphasizes, to be commensurable is to be *reducible* to a common measure, to be divisible *without remainder*. But remainder, as the bundling of qualities suggests, is unavoidable. What happens when the assertion of similarity brings with it intimations of something anathema to one's being? Commensuration creates about it its own excesses, "surfeits" in Nakassis's (2013) terms, sometimes turning the process that bred it on its head; *incommensurability* has its own effects at once productive and disruptive. In Yeh's piece, for example, Mexican nationalists seek to squelch any sense of disproportion as they commensurate US and Mexican forms, but in the next breath, they are busy resuscitating just that incommensurable difference in order to claim for themselves the extra value of the more prestigious form. And Chumley shows how Chinese artists' efforts to create prestige by pointing to the ubiquity of "foreign" objects (which, until pointed out, likely did not seem foreign at all, but just part of day-to-day existence) nix themselves: this very logic of cultural purism makes impossible the authentically Chinese modern aesthetic they all strive to invent. The unpredictability of the fetish here is apropos. As Pietz (1985) famously proposed, the fetish is not original either to Africa or Europe, but arose in the encounter between the two. It was a commensurative tool par excellence, a judge in its own right, burdened with the practical imperative to bridge radically disparate sociocultural orders. As it succeeded in moving goods and furthering exchange, the misrecognitions that concentrated themselves in it nonetheless gave rise to entirely new institutional formations. As much as commensuration is a reduction, it is also, finally, an augmentation: in the transformation across a boundary, qualities are winnowed away and a different set is bundled in.

Lee and LiPuma (2002), mentioned earlier, build their discussion of “cultures of circulation” around three major abstractions, three reflexively constituted collective actors of Western modernity: the public sphere, the nation-state, and the market. These too are fetishes in the sense that our ways of speaking of them endow them with an agency of their own. They rise out of quotidian commensurations, and in turn authorize not just homologues and paperings-over of all sorts, but also the appearance of radical difference as such. Povinelli (2001) has pointed out of the public sphere—though her observation is equally applicable to the market and the nation-state—that while it sets itself up against its own limits in an eternal project to expand beyond them, the specter of failure in fact lies at the heart of the entire enterprise, justifying renewed expansionist attempts. The ongoing effort to commensurate what is simultaneously set up as incommensurable (the ongoing winnowing out and bundling in of different aspects of different sociocultural realities) does not cease to generate new formations of liberal modernity.

Just as commensuration *does* things (like effect movement and (re)produce authority), so its failure must be examined as itself, oftentimes, an achievement with a multiplicity of outcomes. Our exploration of commensuration recognizes that there is, to paraphrase Silverstein (2003a:92–93), always something transformational even in the most precise translation, not simply loss but also a taking on of new resonances. Depending on the context, commensuration may appear as a reduction, or the emphasis may be on excess, as the would-be commensurated takes on unpredictable new forms of value. Either way, the achievement of commensuration simultaneously produces a realm beyond commensurability, that will always elude a neat equilibration. Our investigations foreground not simply the points where commensuration grinds to a halt, but how these emerge out of commensuration itself, and with what consequences. Failure, we contend, is never merely sutured on at commensuration’s edges.

Conclusion

The present collection began as a panel presented at the American Anthropological Association Meetings in 2010.²⁴ Conversation continued, on and off, over the next three years; in a series of intensive group discussions, everyone read and commented upon everyone else’s papers as they developed. We owe our largest debt, however, to Paul Kockelman, who

served as discussant on the original panel. The influence of his diligent and thoughtful engagement is perhaps nowhere more evident than in this introduction.²⁵

The collection begins with Kelda Jamison's examination of the struggle in Turkey to render Kurdish an adequate "standard" language. Jamison focuses on the pivotal role of text artifacts in asserting the equivalence of Kurdish with Turkish as a legitimate national language. As material forms, dictionaries, newspapers, and text messages may all be mobilized as bearers of an incipient metric grounding the assertion that the two languages are commensurate. At the same time, however (and here lies the rub), while such text artifacts are produced and regularly held aloft (sometimes literally) as signs of the equivalence of Kurdish with Turkish, very few people actually read the texts in question. Jamison's essay, then, probes the qualities and limits of commensurative metrics. What qualities of a standard are key in capacitating commensuration? What slippages and misfires arise as assessments of the standard itself shift? How do linguistic allegiances hang in the balance?

Yeh's piece moves to the edge of the nation-state to examine attempts to secure the movement of currencies, languages, and commodities, to foment and restrict, channel and coordinate their flow via institutional centers of authority. In Tijuana, Mexico—across the border from San Diego, California—dollars and pesos, English and Spanish, US and Mexican commodities circulate apace. In these movements, commensuration bears the everyday burden of mediating differential value and power between two formally equal sovereign nation-states. Claims to equal sovereignty feather apart, however, in the face of a persistent remainder: the real sociopolitical inequality between the two nation-states. But this inequality does not just disrupt quotidian moments of circulation (attempts at arithmetic conversion, literal translation, or the seemingly straightforward practicalities of purchase). Instead, even ardent nationalists resuscitate such inequality to align themselves with the more prestigious forms (of money, language, or consumer goods) and claim these forms' distinction for themselves.

Chumley's essay, too, deals with sharp anxieties in the face of an onslaught of forms that seem to contradict nationalist premises—here, though, on the more generalized scale of China versus "the West." Again, this opposition may be aligned with a series of others: most prominently, tradition versus modernity, though gender too is in the picture. However, these oppositions only come into play through the regimentation of material

indices—not just commodity objects, but, also, prominently, sounds and colors—into one category or the other in situated contexts of interaction. As actors undertake such regimenting moves, the ground of interaction gives way, opening doubts as to their interlocutors' standing as wholly Chinese. Not surprisingly, those who favor these moves are elite artists who stand to gain much from them in terms of cultural authority and prestige. But this kind of re-marking of the material world, making what has become quotidian abruptly pop into the foreground, is hard to control once undertaken. Ultimately, the authenticity of a "Chinese modern" aesthetic, on which artistic careers depend, is the first casualty, though the menace leaks into all ambits of life: what can be "uncommensurated" as Western includes not just imports but the vast majority of consumer goods produced in China for Chinese. As we emphasized above, such objects only "move" here as indexical frames of reference snap in and out of focus, suddenly resituating people and things on either side of a momentous divide.

In 2006, as Hankins describes, a small group of sanitation and tannery workers traveled from Tokyo, Japan, to Chennai, India, to meet a group of people they saw as similar to themselves: the Dalit outcasts. Over four days, these representatives from the caste-based Buraku minority group toured Dalit industries, met with employees and political leaders, and traded experiences both of political success and ongoing struggle against discrimination. Hankins's article examines the figure of pain in these moments of commensuration, asking: how does pain garner authority to substantiate stories of similarity and lend specificity to this project of international solidarity, how does it offer a path for collective understanding and action, and how is pain itself imbued with qualities in these moments of exchange? Following the Buraku activists on their trip, Hankins focuses on sympathetic engagement as a form of commensuration. He examines the conditions that allow these activists to understand their experiences as equivalent to those of South Indian Dalits as they prepare for the trip by learning English and crafting narrations of self and pain, as they narrate experiences of pain in these contexts, and as they endeavor, and perhaps fail, to reconcile their experiences of pain with ones radically different.

Drawing together ethnographic explorations of radically contrastive situations from around the world, the present collection contends that commensuration lies at the crux of the production of complex global orders of hierarchy and authority, traversed and structured by intricately interwoven boundaries of race, ethnicity, nationality, and class. From infra-national

ethnic lines, to fraught encounters at the boundaries of the nation-state, to scenes where supranational authorities come forcefully into play, the geopolitical ambit under consideration expands from essay to essay as they track the complexity of commensuration across politically charged contexts. Maintaining a tense traffic—of linguistic, aesthetic, and moral forms as much as of commodities or currencies—across the boundaries between all sorts of social groups, the twists and turns of commensuration are fundamental to the production of what in every case appear as highly unequal distributions of forms of life. In a world of uneven mobilities, in which objects, people, or texts evoking origins near and far are encountered on an everyday basis, boundaries must continually be set up, erased, intensified, or mitigated in order to locate any social group amid a swirling flux of signs. The social fields examined in the essays collected here are anything but homogeneous or flat; they are sites rife with contestations which, again and again, crucially boil down to the possibilities and limits of commensuration.

In each case, actors fret and tussle over whether two objects are fully or partially commensurable and in what dimensions, or, at an extreme, whether or not they are in fact utterly incommensurable. Routine practices of commensuration both bind together and bound off “cultures of circulation”—social groups understood as constituted in the flux of multiple circulations—of widely varying scope. As an analytic approach grounded in a highly semiotic sensibility, commensuration draws us into the micro-politics, the everyday mechanics, and the lurking hazards of authoritatively managing movement across the boundaries between large-scale social groups today, so deeply haunted by the productivities and pitfalls of “measuring up.” ■

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Endnotes:

¹Povinelli (2001) provides a key critical reading of Western concerns with incommensurability. For an example of anthropological uptake on *incommensurability* in this wider political sense, see Dave (2011).

²Kuhn (1982) himself provides a useful summary of the original ideas and a sense of the path taken by debate over the subsequent 20 years.

³Silverstein (2003a:93–94) has critiqued the metaphorical use of *translation* in an essay that develops what from our perspective is a highly commensurative theory of translation. His theory would, at every step, adequate not just terms themselves, but terms situated within larger systems (whether of grammatico-semantic categories or of cultural indexicalities), the elements of which can be correlated to greater or lesser degrees.

⁴*Translation* is also a key term in science studies (Callon 1986), but there it does not explicitly involve the issue of comparison, fundamentally shared by *commensuration* and *translation* in the linguistic sense.

⁵This analogic calquing is, of course, the structuralist principle at work. It cannot be emphasized enough, however, that, contra Lévi-Strauss, analogies are never naturally salient, but are culturally and historically formed achievements ever requiring uptake. It is as they are performatively mobilized that they acquire cultural authority.

⁶Some of our language here echoes that of debates on commensurability and comparability in rational choice theory (cf. Chang 1997). While those debates seek to establish a universal basis for many of the same kinds of comparisons we examine (legal, ethical, economic), we see commensuration and comparison as cultural and contextually shifting, ever-emergent processes. Their bases, whether moral or rational, are always postulated and risked in action, as the upcoming sections on authority and failure explore at length.

⁷As Sapir explains, “grading as a psychological process precedes measurement and counting” (1944:93).

⁸Jane Guyer (2004) argues that the division between quantity and quality is a conceptual inheritance particular to the West. Quantity as quality is not, however, entirely without precedent in Western thought. Heidegger, for instance, writes that “The gigantic is...that through which the quantitative becomes a special quality” (1977:35), an observation that builds on Kant’s (2007) argument on hugeness as sublime.

⁹That any two objects may be in some way similar, and that similarities must thus always be construed, one dimension of comparison weighted against others contextually, is an old point. See, for instance, Goodman (1972).

¹⁰Kockelman (n.d.) discusses the comparability of entire systems (of language, of law, of culture, even), raising issues akin to the broader problematics of incommensurability as developed in the philosophical tradition sparked by Kuhn and Feyerabend. The proportional equation gives the most basic model for such comparability insofar as it brings together two minimal “systems” of two elements each: A and B versus C and D.

¹¹Larkin (2013) too has recently emphasized commensuration’s role in securing circulation as a semiotic achievement.

¹²Latour’s (1986) theory of “translation” likewise emphasizes that movement requires active transformation at every step. Commensuration, in the semiotic sense we propose, plays a necessary role whenever this kind of “translation” is perceived as such.

¹³With *felicity conditions*, we seek to mark the political economic infrastructure that needs to be in place for a semiotic event to take place (cf. Silverstein 2000:123).

¹⁴Think, for instance, of the gift.

¹⁵Kockelman (n.d.) argues that the portability of any system is a measure of its power of abstraction, how well it can assert a standard that can produce judgments of similarity across contexts. Latour (1987) discusses similar processes in his analysis of scientific action “at a distance.” In the following section, we take up the issue of authority and the building of standards.

¹⁶In Silverstein’s words, “transformed material, emerging out of an [en]text[ualization]-in-context, can be put in correspondence with source material as IT occurs in [en]text[ualization]-in-context” (2003a:93).

¹⁷This is what they mean by *abstraction* in the quote that opens this section.

¹⁸This is not to say that a Kurdish “we” is lacking, only that print has not become a vehicle of linguistic nationalism.

¹⁹In the Christian tradition, one of Cain’s many sins was the invention of weights and measures (Kula 1986:3).

²⁰International borders, for instance, are designed not just to impede certain flows but to expedite others. In doing so, they mark with differentiated value (legal or illegal) the semiotic forms that traverse them. The

nation-state, thus, depends not just on an assemblage of legal circulations, but on the complex intertwining of differentially-marked forms in motion.

²¹Compare the ancient Greeks: "In Athens, the standards of weights and measures were in safekeeping on the Acropolis, additionally secure in their dedication to the gods...and specialist officials were employed to authenticate them" (Kula 1986:18).

²²The kilogram is the only metric unit still defined by a physical object, though it is scheduled to be replaced in favor of a physical constant.

²³Munn (1986) discusses "bundling": actually existing qualities always come in conglomerates; e.g., the redness in an apple comes along with a spherical shape and light weight. Keane (2003:414) argues that this is one of the fundamental effects of materiality: "redness cannot be manifest without some embodiment that inescapably binds it to some other qualities as well, which can become contingent but real factors in its social life." Building upon this line of work, Chumley and Harkness argue that experiences of qualities "serve as much to proliferate cognitive associations as delimit them" (2013:7).

²⁴The only paper missing is Blunt's (2013) excellent essay on the commensuration in colonial Kenya between British and native legal regimes.

²⁵We have relied in particular on Kockelman's (n.d.) essay, which was an extension of his comments on our original panel. His piece offers an analytic grid with which to sift the nitty-gritties of how equivalence is judged in practice. Ranging across such processes as literary translations and economic transactions, chemical reactions and computer algorithms, mathematical deductions and legal decisions, Kockelman develops a general theory of how similarity is construed across encounters, a theory that attends in particular to the myriad ways in which equilibration can be perturbed or even utterly obliterated in actual encounters.

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Foreign Language Translations:

Introduction to the Special Collection

To Bind and To Bound: Commensuration Across Boundaries

特辑：前言

联结与划界：论跨疆界的通约性

Соединить и ограничить: Соизмеримость через границы

Introdução à Série Especial

Ligar e Limitar: Comensuração Através de Fronteiras

مقدمة للمجموعة الخاصة
الربط والقفز: التناسب عبر الحدود