



On Kinship, Race, and Reproduction: Questions and Responses to Matters Expounding on Kinship from Amaryah Armstrong, Balbir Singh, and Andrea Baldwin

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INTERVIEW



ABSTRACT

Amaryah Armstrong, Balbir Singh, and Andrea Baldwin are assistant professors at Virginia Tech in the Religion and Culture Department who, over the course of a semester, co-taught an ASPECT graduate seminar entitled *Kin: Feminist Theories of Race and Reproduction*. Throughout the class they each centered on the concept of kinship and critically interrogated sub-concepts that came up around subjectivity, agency, and alienation, identifying implications of a complex network of kinship ties. The following is a dialogue reflecting on their collective expectations and experience of planning and facilitating the seminar, while also practicing the intentional cultivation of a space where degrees of kinship could be formed between themselves and the students.

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KEYWORDS:

Subjectivity; Agency; Alienation;
Kin

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Ramnath, Leah. "On Kinship, Race, and Reproduction: Questions and Responses to Matters Expounding on Kinship from Amaryah Armstrong, Balbir Singh, and Andrea Baldwin." *SPECTRA* 9, no. 1 (2022): pp. 5–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/spectra.v9i1.206>

Armstrong: To be honest, this is a question that I continue to have and part of what I was hoping for from this class was more space to explore what all goes on under the name of “Kin.” Several things interest me about the idea: namely the convergence of caring relations, intimacy, and the organization of society along lines of descent and economy. In this way, my fundamental or recurring interest in Kin and kinship is how it works as a way of reproducing order. Determining kinship is a way of situating oneself and one’s people in relationship to others, it’s a way of determining how resources are distributed, it’s a way of arranging relationships and norms, it’s also kind of an inescapable disaster even as it’s highly desirable or difficult to imagine life without. The difficulty of answering the questions is, I think, why it is such a ripe site for exploration and such a central category of feminist thought.

Singh: Kin is everything. It is blood, but also running from one’s blood. It is about blood family, chosen family, relationality both through and against genealogy. It is centrally located, for my own investments—on personal, political, and ethical levels—with the study of inheritance, intimacy, and estrangement. Truthfully, I find it hard to shy away from some of the more psychoanalytic modes of reading and studying Kin, as there is so much there that I can draw on and find meaning in. Overwhelmingly, the necessity to focus on women of color feminist thought as a way of studying kinship is essential to my understanding, and structures how I approach my own writing and research questions. I think, too, of mothering as a verb—as per Gumbs’ and Martens’ anthology—as an important mode in which to think about relation, ancestry, trauma, healing, love, and care. In many ways, kinship isn’t legible per se in my work, but it haunts and animates my own relation and commitment to ethnic studies and the study of race, and to the project of Sikhi and the Sikh diaspora (of which I am a part), as well as to how to approach forms of solidarity and community, always.

Baldwin: First, I am answering this question as a Black woman for whom relationships with blood relatives are very, very important. I was raised in a typical working-class Caribbean matriarchal household where the women are the ones in charge of providing financially and caring for the household. They still subscribe to patriarchal ideologies which center the boy child while raising girl children to be self-sufficient, and to live a life independent of men. Within this household I learned that I could depend on the women in my family, my grandmother, my mother and my aunts, while the men, with very few exceptions, were unreliable and somewhat irresponsible. I mention this to say that my definition of Kin is grounded in those relationships of trust, love, care, and also the profound belief that the women in my maternal family had in my ability to be whatever I wanted to be. Because of this grounding as I became older and started to forge a life of my own, independent of my blood family, the love, care and support of Black women I mentioned above was what I longed for as I started to forge my non-biological Kin relationships. Kin for me, therefore, is where there is extended love of Black women whether in my family, or my people who I have chosen to be in relationship with who are not related by blood. So, for instance, my best friend, who I’ve known since I was 11, when I moved to Barbados with my new husband of four years in 2008, and we were trying to get our lives together, she was moving into a new apartment and her old apartment was going to be free for a month, and she just let us live there for free until we could find our own. My other best friend, he calls my mom “Mom” and I call his mom “Mom,” too. Kin are the people with whom I have those types of relationships, relationships that I’ve cultivated over the years with people who I love and trust, who know my deepest, darkest secrets, but are not related to me by blood.

Kin for me is also contextual because I feel like I have Kin here at Virginia Tech, and I hate being at Virginia Tech, but I’ve developed relationships with people who are Black women, women of color, who you see and who see you, and who you feel so connected to. And the kinship comes because you don’t feel as though you have to be beholden to these very archaic and arbitrary hierarchical boundaries and borders that say, you are a student and I’m faculty, and therefore the only relationship we can ever foster in the space is one of dominance or relationships to power with each other. And I feel like here in this space I’ve developed really close relationships of care and of kinship, where, for instance, my back was pulled out and you automatically said to me I have this oil I’m going to bring it over to your house. That is a kinship relationship. I’m in this writing group called Solidarity for Black Women. They threw me a surprise party at the end of the semester (spring 2022), and I bawled my eyes out, and it was so unexpected and so

beautiful, and it felt like family. I've never had a surprise party ever. I've never had a party that I did not throw for myself ever in my life, and that these women who I have known for the last four years felt so connected to me that they felt like they needed to show it in the way that they did, and it felt good. And I think that contextually, in this space, they're my Kin. You are my Kin in this space. We develop relationships like that. So, I want to say, Kin is contextual. Yeah, we have blood relatives, but we have those people who come into our lives in certain spaces where we must develop those bonds, those kinship bonds to survive, and not only to survive, but to also thrive.

Why did you all decide to put this class together? What did you hope to accomplish, and what was your experience facilitating this space?

Armstrong: I like thinking about things I don't have a settled answer to, and I enjoy doing that with other people who are also curious about thinking through things they don't have the answers to. When Balbir put forward the idea, I was instantly on board because she and Dr. Baldwin are people I think are exciting to do serious intellectual work with, and I knew I would get to learn a lot from them. I think we brought our own interests and fixations and fascinations and passions about kinship to this class and I loved the kind of sharing we got to have. The students also brought so much energy to the space and were clearly hungry and ready to engage with these questions, and I found it very special to also get to be together in a very vibrant and live way even in a hybrid class.

Singh: I approached both Andrea and Amaryah for the sheer desire to teach with colleagues who are also friends. I had been looking for an excuse to do so, and this idea to teach "Kin" as a class was originally supposed to have no subtitle. A side note that I am one for shorter titles in academic spaces; the less I know, the better, [laughs]. Speaking to both co-instructors, a subtitle of "Feminist Theories of Race and Reproduction" became necessary by way of explanation for course descriptions. I think we ultimately all wanted to cultivate a space of exchange, conversation, study, and care. Our units, while distinct and specific to our own interests and lines of inquiry, were ways to demonstrate the many framings and theoretical work that makes the study of Kin so rich. In particular, learning from both Andrea and Amaryah was a gift; this term has only heightened and expanded what the study of Kin and kinship is and can be for me, particularly because of their generous and generative instruction and respective teaching styles. I do believe we had such an amazing group of students and colleagues, true interlocutors, who read and engaged with such attention to detail. We also had the benefit of an interdisciplinary class, which always makes for more complex and rigorous discussion; the small moments of explaining terms that were unclear to others, or the relation of material to other fields of thought, or even what appeared to be tangents, but were actually unraveling another approach or way of reading—such moments made this seminar one of my favorite pedagogical experiences to date.

Baldwin: In a way, this class grew out of a kinship bond for me. My decision agreeing to put this class together was less about what we were going to teach and more about who I was teaching with, and that we are (still) in a pandemic. First, it was not my idea to put this class together but Dr. Balbir Singh's. We came to [Virginia] Tech at the same time, and we have built a really amazing relationship. When my family had COVID, she had food delivered and is just overall such a kind person. We're almost opposites, I think. I am, what we call in Barbados, a "fire galash" (feisty), so I'm big on personality and I just love how sweet and reassuring and generous Dr. Singh is, in her own way. She is also an amazing scholar; both her and Dr. Amaryah Armstrong. We're very similar in our theoretical engagements and methodologies; we do similar work, but I am in awe of their research and the way they approach their work with care. I wouldn't say that about 99.9% of people on campus.

Regarding course readings, I had just finished teaching a class centered around Feminisms, Fugitivity and Futurity, and I had assigned novels. One of those novels was Octavia Butler's *kindred*. So, my mind was already on Kin. It was difficult to choose readings for our class, but I knew I wanted to use novels because they are so rich. This class was intentionally grounded in international perspectives and theories in feminism, gender, and race. I specifically wanted to center Blackness, Caribbeanness, immigrantness, and novels provided a good basis to do this. From my experience in the classroom spaces in the US, we always start from this Eurocentric

perspective and we rarely, if ever, get to the minoritized and marginalized perspective. I wanted my sections of the class to be unapologetically about Black women, but also to be unapologetically about the Caribbean. I wanted to bring Caribbean knowledges to the forefront of the class and show how and why Caribbean subject matter matters.

I have felt like Western academics feel like they don't have to know about us, Caribbean people, like deeply know about us; deeply know about our culture, about our experiences, about the complicated and conflicting racial and political structure. The Caribbean is key in many ways to Western modernism, because we are forced to be Kin with the West through colonization and capitalism and white supremacy. The Caribbean already had kinship relationships and I wanted to show again that there's this relationship between the Caribbean and the rest of the globe where we are central to global development. I wanted us to sit and read about the Caribbean and learn about this scholarship and the amazing, complicated, beautiful, gorgeous, righteous, and ugly details of it all. All these novels show the political economy that creates the space and holds the space, and also those places outside of the space. They contextualize and show how kinship relationships are relationships of violence, such that they trickle down into even the most intimate spaces, like the sex work we saw when we read *Gloria*, and how these relationships always an already mediated by these global superstructures. In general, the Caribbean is just thought of as tourist destinations and then associated as happy, unproblematic places. And to another extent, because of this association as vacation destinations, the Caribbean is synonymized as primitive or backward. But that could not be a more wrong assumption; Paul Gilroy says that the Caribbean is one the first modern spaces, integral to global development. People do not think about how the Caribbean was used and abused toward this end.

What does this SPECTRA space mean for you?

Armstrong: I think it's great to have a record of the kind of thinking together that happened in the class. For me, the space is very generative and representative of the kind of solitary and communal thinking that happens once the class is over. I love seeing the overflow of the course into print.

Singh: It is truly strange to reflect on a seminar that wrapped up only two weeks ago, but will sit with me for a long time. This space is a generative way to speak to some of what has lingered with me from when we were first developing this seminar in Fall 2020, what feels like so long ago. Part of what is so interesting about teaching these seminars is how they germinate long before you may actually get to see it come to life in the classroom, and in our class over zoom. I appreciate the opportunity to learn with and from Andrea, Amaryah, and our amazing students, all part of the Kin family.

Baldwin: I always believe that when in the space of the classroom that knowledge is shared. I have learned a lot from the class myself. There's a lost opportunity when students produce papers for class, and they just disappear into the academic black hole. They should be encouraged to publish because they are producing good work right here and right now. So, for me, it is just an extension of my philosophy that the classroom is the space of knowledge production. Pedagogy is not just about sharing in that space and letting it float off into the ether, but also producing and validating this knowledge as we go along. This SPECTRA issue is a great opportunity for students to see themselves as knowledge producers. We are not just simply discussing a book but producing valuable knowledge through meaningful conversation and taking each other seriously as colleagues and knowledge producers. This class has been a special place and the opportunity to publish with SPECTRA elevates the experience. I do this in my Black feminisms class where we work through concepts together, combining old with new concepts and presenting different perspectives and experiences—and I think to myself, this cannot just stop there. Especially with this class, I have thought about how we were going to wrap up as a group after we have gotten to know each other and learned from each other. This publication opportunity has presented itself as a demonstration of what kinship is and what it can do; I think about this special issue as an archive itself, too. It's an archive not just of what happened, but that three women, Black and Brown women, taught a class, in the spirit of kinship, in a setting that was not necessarily intimate but there was an actual performance of care for me.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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SPECTRA
DOI: 10.21061/spectra.
v9i1.206

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Ramnath, Leah. "On Kinship, Race, and Reproduction: Questions and Responses to Matters Expounding on Kinship from Amaryah Armstrong, Balbir Singh, and Andrea Baldwin." *SPECTRA* 9, no. 1 (2022): pp. 5–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/spectra.v9i1.206>

Submitted: 28 August 2022

Accepted: 28 August 2022

Published: 26 September 2022

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