

Making Kinship with Objects

Cara Krmpotich¹

¹ Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

E-mail: cara.krmpotich@utoronto.ca

At Victoria College, University of Toronto, I developed a six-week module on Kinship and Materiality for the introductory Material Culture undergraduate course. The module uses various kinds of material culture to consider how kinship is made, affirmed, contested, and challenged across time, space, and changing notions of “family.” Family photographs, domestic architecture, and symbolic items like heirlooms, “totem” poles, or grave markers each provide entry points to understanding how humans express and experience family.

Our starting point, however, is the range of ideas about inheritance and the shared bodily substances that make people kin: blood, genes, breast milk, bone, food. Rather than prioritize any of these as “right,” the goal is to understand how notions of kinship often rely on shared substances. Course readings, for instance, introduce examples from American kinship that accounts for blood and marriage, and Islamic legal perspectives guiding breast milk donation.

The potential for memory to be a “shared substance” of kinship is a central component of my own research. I am curious about the potential for shared memory to be as important to the creation of kinship as genes, or blood, or marriage. Scholars Kath Weston and Janet Carsten each propose the importance of shared memories of everyday life and marked life events (holidays, rites of passage) in the formation of queer families and adoptive families, respectively.⁸⁷ Nadia Seremetakis also identifies shared embodied and sensory memories as building blocks within European families. In my work with the Haida Repatriation Committee, I considered how the Repatriation Committee’s creation of button blanket robes with clan crests, woven cedar roses, and special foods for repatriated ancestors instill Haida family relations following a period of rupture.

More recently, I am trying to tell our own family’s history through musical instruments. The instruments, Croatian tamburas, bear material traces of migration. When put in conversation with photographs and newspaper stories, they trace efforts to build community and form enduring social relationships. In our hands and against our bodies, the instruments produce shared soundscapes and muscle memory. Practicing music fills homes with a repertoire of melodies and songs, creating shared aural memories across family members. Performance, meanwhile, connects the personal and the public. Over three generations, our family has amassed an orchestra of tamburas, some twenty-seven instruments in total.

One instrument I have been tracing with my aunt, Peggy Krmpotich, is a *prim* (pronounced “preem”) or *bisernica*. It is slightly smaller in size than the other eight *prim*s in our family. Peggy is the most recent person to be playing this *prim*, though its history extends back to 1933. It was made in Osijek, Yugoslavia, by Josip Rohrbacher. Like my own paternal great-grandparents, it crossed the Atlantic, immigrating to Canada. We do not know when or how the *prim* first arrived, but my grandfather, Louis Krmpotich, began playing this *prim* when he was about 18 years old. A photograph shows him holding the *prim* with the first Croatian tambura band he played in, the Balkan Serenaders, in approximately 1940 or ’41. The band also included the mayor of our Northern Ontario city, my great-uncle for whom my father was named, and three other men.

⁸⁷ When teaching about kinship, it is important to consider diverse family compositions and the potential for difficult personal histories to be associated with family. Family diagrams showing divorce, remarriage, and queer marriage are available, as are visuals of interracial, and multi-generational families. There is ample literature that affirms adoption, surrogacy and queer relationships as generative of kinship.



Figure 1. Two prims, the one on the left was made by Josip Rohrbacher in 1933 and played by Louis Krmpotich. The one on the right was made by Frank Benko in Toronto, Canada, in the late 1960s, for Peggy Krmpotich. It is also the instrument the author learned to play on in the mid-1980s. Photograph by Cara Krmpotich.

As an adult, my grandfather began teaching Croatian music and establishing bands and orchestras for adults and children. Being Croatian was never a requirement, nor was owning your own instrument. While the orchestras at times fundraised to purchase instruments, or families purchased their own, my grandfather also loaned out a number of his own instruments for practicing and performances. The instruments, then, connect our family to generations of the Croatian immigrant and settler community in our town, and are entwined with parish histories, social clubs and picnic grounds, neighbourhoods, and policies promoting multiculturalism in Canadian society. In April 1961, the local newspaper ran a story about the instruments and the start of one of the orchestras. The accompanying photos show this prim in the hands of a young boy, who remains a family friend.

I never saw my grandfather play this prim; I always remember him playing a larger instrument called a *brač* and, later still, playing the Croatian cello. My aunt, though, remembers him playing the prim, and even remembers a family trip to Minnesota that we were able to date thanks to a paper note tucked away in a tin by my grandfather. The handwritten note was from Albert Palla, a tambura luthier, who converted this prim from a “D prim” to a “G prim” which requires the removal of two frets and increasing the number of strings from five to six. Because of the

modifications, Palla was able to see the maker's label inside the instrument (otherwise invisible) and wrote to my grandfather, "Louis: Your Prim was Made 1933 by: Yosip Rohrbacher in city of Osijek I. Province of Slavonija Yugoslavia." The note was dated Sunday, Sept 12, 1971, and helped us decode the faint engraving on the metal plate on the instrument's headstock: "Rebuilt and made into G prim by A Palla & Sons South St Paul Minnesota 1971."

Peggy, an accomplished musician, music teacher, and conductor of adult and children's tambura groups, reports that this is now her favourite prim to play. Her fingers can move quickly across the frets; it has, as she calls it, "good action." When we first began learning about this prim, we focused on its material form, cross-referenced with its appearance in photographs, its description in notebooks, and my aunt's memories. Later, we also sought to learn from its sound, from the instrument in action. Over the course of an afternoon, we recorded ourselves playing instruments. Peggy played harmony on this prim, and I played melody on another, as we recorded the first of five tracks. With each track, we added more instruments, two at a time, including my grandfather's favourite brac, cello and bugarija. In our stories, and in our hands, we remembered him and how well he played.

In-Class "Object Elicitation" Exercise

Provide students with a week to find an item from their lives that relates to their family (broadly conceived) and that they are comfortable talking about. It should be portable, unlikely to break, and of low monetary value.

Ideally, students might talk with someone in their family about their choice ahead of time, so people are aware the item is being brought to school, but also to encourage family discussion and shared stories, information & meanings generated by the item.

In pairs or groups of three, one student at a time introduces their peer(s) to the item they brought. Introductory information can include:

- its name in English and/or other relevant languages
- what it is used for / what it does
- who it belongs to
- when it came into the family and/or student's life.

It's okay if some of this information is unknown to the student.

Peers should then ask questions prompted by the item itself, to stimulate knowledge sharing.

Features of an object that might evoke questions and discussion include:

- dents, scratches or repairs: what caused them? When do they happen? Who was responsible?
- style and design: what time period do they suggest? What was happening in the family during that period? What world events were happening in that period that effected the family? Is it made for particular persons (e.g. children, men, women, seniors, the working class, chefs, deaf/hard-of-hearing, nurses, etc.)?
- handwriting: whose handwriting is it? What was their relationship to the item? To the student? What does the handwriting say? Who were they likely writing to or writing for?
- materials: is it hand-made or machine made? Are the materials local or from another place? Who was involved in transforming the material into an artifact – would they have worked alone, as a family unit, as an employee? What might the maker's family life have been like?

Peers can also ask questions to the student about why they selected the item, encouraging the sharing of memories and meaning. Possible questions include:

- What prompted you to choose this item?

- What memories does it elicit for you? Are there sounds, or smells, or tastes that are part of those memories?
- Is this item usually kept with other items? What else is near it, or used alongside it?
- Where is this item kept? Is it in a prominent place for others to see, or a more private location? What other places has the item been, whether different rooms or houses, or different cities or countries?
- Who else is connected to this item?

Students can create their own questions, and its likely there will be questions that remain unanswered.

Students could work collectively in their pair/team, or as a class, to compare and learn about kinship from the objects brought in and the information shared as a result. What insights about kinship for this group of people are generated through the exercise? What are the similarities and differences? How is kinship changing over time and/or space? Could students imagine an exhibition about kinship with the items at its core? What stories would they privilege for each object?

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