In her article Mary Weismantel aims to “look at contemporary Zumbagua kinship, not as a set of facts to be interpreted using ‘our own’ theories, but rather as a theory and a practice in its own right” (p. 687). Although the goal is admirable, its achievement is undermined by some of her own assumptions.

Weismantel demonstrates that the framework of classic kinship theory presupposes the foundational primacy of nature, blood, and biology in the definition of kinship and that this makes it difficult to comprehend adoption, which contravenes the logic of biology altogether. Consequently, she argues, the opposition central to Euro-American kinship theory between a primary, essentialized, biological base (nature) and a secondary, jural and historical social edifice (culture) is totally inappropriate to the analysis of Zumbagua kinship theory.

It is therefore puzzling that in presenting this critique she simultaneously reproduces the same opposition in her analysis. She frequently evokes a distinction between symbols, ceremony, disembodied ritual, words, metaphors, documents, the jural, the logocentric, the social, and the spiritual, on the one hand, and the material, physical, biological, and corporeal, on the other (pp. 694–695). Although the explicit purpose of Weismantel’s article is to transcend these
oppositions, her discussion is often shaped by their continued presence, which derives from a particular tension in her reading of the history of anthropological theory.

The force of her argument depends on two observations, which take her in two opposite directions. Her first observation is that things cultural and symbolic have generally been treated as inherently distinct from, and epiphenomenal to, a more "real" (universal) material base. The problems this theoretical distinction creates for her analysis of Zumbagua kinship lead her to attempt to transcend the opposition between the material and symbolic altogether. Toward this end she pursues an analysis of Zumbagua kinship that is "restricted neither to a biological determination rooted in insemination nor to a jural or symbolic definition based on metaphor" (p. 695). Weismantel's solution is to define Zumbagua kinship in terms of a relationship that "would be at once physiological—a link between bodies, experienced as one of shared substance—and ideal—a link between social identities, experienced as a shared fate in life" (p. 694).

Weismantel has here reinvented something very close to Schneider's distinction between shared "substance" and "code for conduct" (1968:21–29). It is, therefore, paradoxical that she sets her own work in opposition to Schneider's (and symbolic analysis more generally) when Schneider, his students, and others did (some years ago) exactly what this article sets out to do. Yet she forces herself into such an oppositional position by her understanding of the nature of symbolic anthropology.

Her second observation is that those anthropologists who concern themselves with culture and symbols have no concern with the material aspects of social life. In a reading typical of a materialist position, she contends that such anthropologists treat symbols, rituals, and even the social itself as disembodied and merely metaphorical phenomena. I would suggest that this is a serious misreading, since symbolic anthropologists have not only explored, but also insisted upon, the material nature of symbols. Turner, for instance, asserted that a symbol comprises both an ideological and a sensory pole (1967:28–29). Although this latter was—from my point of view, problematically—based in our own ideas of universal "primordial psychobiological experience" (Turner 1967:90), it nevertheless reveals the centrality of the physical and material to the symbolic in Turner's scheme of things. Geertz, too, argued that the reasoning integral to the use of symbols (a synthesis of ethos and world view) involved not the private workings of a disembodied mind but rather the public engagement with, and manipulation of, "objective materials" in the world (1973:75–89). With Sahlins (1976) the distinction between a material base and a social/cultural form collapses altogether. The symbolic is no longer the reflection of a material base—or even, in a Durkheimian sense, of the "social"—but its very organization (Sahlins 1976). To recognize the symbolic here is not to ignore the material but to affirm that other worlds (including, specifically, other material worlds) are organized in fundamentally different ways and do not consist simply of different cultural masks covering a "real" universal material/practical base.

Despite Weismantel's efforts to transcend the opposition between the symbolic and the material, her emphasis on the material has several notable consequences for her interpretation of Zumbagua kinship, which, in the end, contradict her original intention. First, at those points where she responds to the presumed neglect by symbolic anthropologists of the material dimension of social life, it leads her not only to emphasize the physical nature of sharing food but also, explicitly or implicitly, to oppose this physicality to that which is social and symbolic (pp. 694–695). It is, however, hard to imagine how this antithesis assists her to understand adoption, since it forces asunder a set of intertwined—simultaneously social, symbolic, and physical—meanings that, in the end, she must struggle to reassemble.

Second, Weismantel's theoretical posture colors her conceptualization of the overarching difference between American and Zumbagua culture. Strangely, in her characterization of Western kinship theory as logocentric and Zumbagua kinship theory as materialist (pp.
694–695), she has resurrected yet another version of the (nature/culture) opposition she has set out to criticize. She does this despite her own evidence that Western ideas of kinship are just as materialist—linked to blood and biology, if not food (pp. 688, 690, 693–694)—as Zumbagua ideas of kinship are also logocentric, even though the authority of words to constitute kinship is socially diffuse rather than jurally singular (pp. 694, 696). Such an analysis skews her understanding of both societies and, far from seeing either society’s kinship “in its own terms,” places them in a relational framework that replicates the nature/culture distinction in yet another guise.

Third, this approach also affects her understanding of the rationale for adoption—making it possible for her to fall back upon a universal functionalist explanation of the raison d’être of Zumbagua kinship. Weismantel asserts that Zumbagua people shape their system of kinship in the way they do “in order to survive” (p. 687) on the impoverished periphery of the capitalist world system (pp. 687, 690, 697). Yet survival on the impoverished periphery can hardly account for the specificity of Zumbagua kinship theory, since an incredibly diverse range of kinship theories exists on the “impoverished periphery.” With such an explanation we are again at a great distance from understanding Zumbagua kinship “as a theory and a practice in its own right” (p. 687).

Indeed, the reader longs for a more extensive analysis of indigenous kinship theory and practice. It is only as she draws toward the conclusion of her article that Weismantel begins not only to analyze Zumbagua ideas about shared food (p. 695) and expended time and effort (pp. 696–697) but also to outline the complex indigenous social hierarchy (p. 698) within which the logic of Zumbagua adoption could be profitably explored. Understanding the logic of food, time, and effort in the context of this indigenous social hierarchy (including how this hierarchy intersects with the world system) would yield more clues to the meaning of Zumbagua adoption than any generic theory of survival. It is with some relish that I look forward to Weismantel’s continuing development of these more gustatory aspects of kinship theory.

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response to McKinnon

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In “Nourishing Kinship Theory” Susan McKinnon exposes her family loyalties as one of Schneider’s intellectual kin: symbolic anthropologists who have built a substantial body of work on foundations established by the University of Chicago scholar. Whether or not McKinnon feels a need to “rescue kinship from its post-Schneiderian demise” (Carsten 1995:224), her recipe for reinvigorating kinship studies is clear: more analyses of indigenous cultures in the tradition of Schneider, Turner, and Geertz. But changes in anthropology and the world make this approach untenable. Marilyn Strathern’s long-cherished ambition to “write a counterpart to David Schneider’s American Kinship” proved impossible: not only had postmodern English