Caroline Arni:
“Practice / Introduction”

in: Eric Hounshell, Ruth Amstutz (eds.):

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SHADOW OF THE TREE

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PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION

When we look at "diagrams of relatedness" – what do we see? Lines that cover sheets or printed pages, straight or in serpentines, circles that make space for letters or figurines, colored forms, or a few ink strokes. It is commonplace to say that diagrams are not just interesting because they represent, by visualizing or constructing, a phenomenon that is assumed to exist beyond them; that they, moreover, are products, or leftovers, of practices and uses. But do we see that, too, when we look at diagrams of relatedness? Do we see casual ways of doing or elaborate techniques, hands scribbling over a sheet? Engraving tools laboring on a copper plate? Do we see presentations of diagrams in learned circles or their being abandoned in a drawer for turning out to be failed attempts? How do we know that something is a finished product or just a trace of something else being produced?

Trivial as it may appear, it is worth posing this question: what, in fact, do we see? Products of procedures and traces of uses need to be shown and argued to be just that. This is what the authors in this section do, and by doing so, they add layers and dimensions to the diagrams at hand.

We learn, in the contribution of Amos Kuster, how a sparse family tree whose few "brittle branches" evoke a profound and enduring solitude obfuscates a quite brimming (if not unencumbered) social network that surrounds a certain Robert Häfeli – and was of no interest to those who used the mental ward as a source of gathering data on hereditary disease. ▸ PRACTICE / PSYCHIATRIC TREE Compared to the Häfeli family tree bearing the trace of a failed instance of data gathering, the pedigree of a deaf-mute family introduced in Amir Teicher's contribution makes this very "messiness and manifoldness" of data disappear. Presenting a supreme match of Mendelian theory (as depicted in the pedigree) and real-life events (as subtly claimed by a caption in narrative past tense) it is, however, a fully-fledged artifact produced by a "pedagogical blurring process" that was quite successful in consolidating Mendelian theory for biopolitical purposes. ▸ PRACTICE / MENDELIZING PEDIGREES The diagrammatic work done by maps of the Austrian empire, which convey clear-cut classifications of ethnicities and nationalities as shown in Eric Hounshell's contribution, must be understood as equally artificial, namely as "false concretizations of murky concepts." ▸ PRACTICE / MAPPING ETHNICITY

No blurring or falseness is at work in the genealogical diagrams of German dynasties presented by Michaela Hohkamp, but they are just as flexible. ▸ PRACTICE / STEMMA, TABULA, SYSTEMA Or how else can we interpret that a female ancestor first disappears according to changing concepts of kin relations, only to reappear centuries later – not in the wake of novel ways of conceiving kin but in service of a novel claim for evidence that turned genealogies into "an instrument for proving dynastic relations." And what about the table of descent that depicts a certain Josef Katzensteiner as having grandparents but no parents, neither father nor mother? With astounding ease, this diagram analyzed by Elisabeth Timm breaks with the rules of the family tree – just to hide (or amend?) the unruly event of illegitimate birth. ▸ PRACTICE / GENEALOGY OF ILLEGITIMACY Finally, as if to make a deliberate case for eclectic "diagramming," the engraving Stéphanie Prieto contributes to the collection reveals itself to be just that: an enigmatic mesh of figurines, hearts, and hands resulting from a Protestant pastor making use of canonist traditions when searching for novel ways of illustrating incest prohibitions. ▸ PRACTICE / OF HANDS, HEARTS, AND TREES

Is it a coincidence that many contributions in this section do not only convey the splendid creativity of diagrammatic practices but also make it seem like diagrams of relatedness play some kind of hide-and-seek with the observer? (At least with an observer who does not con-

tent herself with beholding the elaborate craftsmanship or, just as well, the aesthetic of the sketchy and unintended, the unfinished and casual on display.) Is it by mere chance that a semantics of "obfuscating," "obscuring," "hiding," and "blurring" runs through the contributions? Given the fact that diagrams are epistemological and demonstrative tools, it comes as no surprise but is all the more noteworthy that they more often than not are driven by a desire for completeness while being the result of highly selective practices and also more often than not claim naked evidence while being highly imaginative – and that the authors of diagrams equally more often than not are themselves well aware of these contradictions. Can this be attributed to the fact that diagrams of relatedness are particularly prone to be used by political power since they concern social organization? Or, to put it in a different perspective, that they are conspiring with specific politics from the get-go? Many contributions to this section attest to such a history of diagrammatic politics or political diagramming.

And how would all this sharpen the sense for epistemological politics when scholars, as David Sabean does in his contribution on kinship diagrams in anthropology and social history, reflect upon their own diagrammatic practice? ▸PRACTICE / GENEALOGY AND SOCIAL HISTORY Perhaps more urgently than it might seem for their explanatory outlook, diagrams of relatedness thus raise the question: what do we see when we look at them?