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Dialectics of Association and Dissociation: Spaces of Valuation, Trade and Retail in the Gemstone and Jewelry Sector

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Abstract

This article aims to substantiate how processes of valuation *translate* between different registers of value. We develop an analytical framework of how valuation is intertwined with geographic origination and the geographies of association and dissociation, which establish how commodities and consumer products are either associated with, or dissociated from, matters that are beneficial or damaging for sales and brand reputation. The article focuses on the rather unexplored gemstone and jewelry sector, and shows how the analysis of value is not reducible to Marxist notions of exchange and use value but needs to take into account symbolic and sign value, and embrace dis/association dialectics. It develops a novel conceptual framework that draws upon the early work of Baudrillard on symbolic value, together with Marxian value theory, and mobilizes it for the analysis of association–dissociation dialectics and practices in global value chains. We are particularly concerned with the role of origination and provenance to highlight the intrinsically geographic dimensions of gemstones that are enacted by traders and retailers in the valuation process. The article shows how valuation and consumption of gemstone and jewelry play out through complex and multiscalar, relational associative and dissociative practices, which intertwine with revealed sustainability problems in the diamond industry. It shows how a current rise in the value and popularity of colored stones interrelate with a corporate refocusing away from mined diamonds, and entails even more in-transparent supply networks.

In a globalized world with geographically stretched production networks of commodities across a vast range of industries, a rising consumer focus on sustainability has emerged (see Ponte 2019). Accordingly, such commodities and related consumer products are either associated with, or dissociated from, matters that are considered beneficial or damaging for retail sales and brand reputation. Both practices have recently been framed as the dialectics of association and dissociation (see Bair 2019; Ibert et al. 2019a, 2019b). In this article, we focus on the gemstone and jewelry industry that contains significant and strong geographic elements of such association–dissociation dialectics that underpin processes of valuation. Gemstones are unambiguously geographic in nature and highly connected to the *grounded* nature and origin of precious stones. Geography and *place* are also extraordinarily important aspects of gemstone and jewelry valuation, and particularly intertwined with practices of association and dissociation. Our overall argument unfolds in three steps: First, in contemporary capitalism, the analysis of value is not reducible to Marxist notions of exchange and use value but needs to take into account symbolic/sign value. We therefore develop a novel framework that integrates Marxist theory of exchange value with concepts of symbolic and sign value as developed in Jean Baudrillard’s early work. Second, processes of valuation, *translating* between these different registers of value, rely on geographies of association and dissociation, in a dialectical way. Third, these association–dissociation dialectics (also referred to below as dis/association) are enacted by traders and retailers highlighting and/or hiding geographic origination and provenance in the valuation process. These practices can ultimately lead to structural change in the geography and organization of the global value chain (GVC).

The dialectics of association and dissociation, as connected with a rising attention to responsible consumption and production, has thus become an important determinant for valuation. Economic geography research has contributed substantially to our understanding of *associations* and the practices and spaces of brands and branding. This includes important work exploring geographic origination as associations between particular places and the value of products and brands (see Pike 2013, 2015). Lately, dissociations (for example, from social and environmental problems) have also been recognized as geographic strategies of actors in value chains but have received less attention as a set of practices that is more than just the flipside of branding. This is shown recently by Ibert et al. (2019a), who elaborate on and conceptualize geographies of dissociation as an important and distinctive element of value creation and valuation at various nodes in global networks. This article provides an original conceptual and empirical contribution to the extant literature by developing an analytical framework of how the geographies of association and dissociation are entangled with processes of valuation, and uses this framework to analyze the gemstone and jewelry industry.

The article examines how an ongoing rise in the popularity and value of colored gemstones intertwine with a corporate refocusing away from mined diamonds, and is highly intertwined with the dialectics of association and dissociation. Historically, diamonds became recognized as the most valuable and desirable stone due to the groundwork of the most important name in the diamond sector for centuries, the De Beers Group, which dominated diamond mining and distribution since 1929 (Henn 2012). This corporation played a major role in the preservation of the image of diamonds as rare, and thus valuable, commodities, though diamonds "greatest price determinant is limited supply, not rarity in nature" (Bieri 2013, 3). This strategy entailed strict market control via quota and exclusive contracts with suppliers and one-channel distribution of rough diamonds. From the 1990s, diamonds were however no longer only associated with luxurious spaces for consumption but increasingly also with images of human rights abuses in supply countries and long-lasting struggle for control over mining and trading. The role of profiteering diamond corporations, De Beers in particular, was revealed by civil society organizations and the UN (Le Billon 2006; Bieri 2013; Haufler 2015). Consequently, the image and value of diamonds was challenged and problematized, while it has also recently been pointed out that diamonds no longer rise in value and are even often overrated (*Channel News Asia* 2018). At the same time, the value of certain colored gemstones, such as rubies of specific qualities, has ascended notably within the past few years—and so has consumption of a variety of colored gemstones (Shortell and

Irwin 2017; *PR Newswire* 2018). This surge in the market for colored gemstone has been seen as a strategic corporate move toward using stones that are claimed to be more sustainable (Shortell and Irwin 2017; *Channel News Asia* 2018). The social and environmental problems of the colored gemstone industry have not yet been the focal point of similar scrutiny and intensive research as diamonds, though they are no less likely to be severe. In fact, ruby mining and sourcing has come to be seen as the next *blood trade* (*Forbes* 2015; Valoi 2016).

In our contribution, we show how retail and trading constitute important sites of association, dissociation, and valuation in the colored gemstone sector, which is not monopoly driven but characterized by global lead firms and buyers having relatively little importance. Instead, independent gemstone traders and small-scale retailers play a crucial role. The colored gemstone sector also illustrates how dissociative practices are not necessarily *only* hiding problems from consumers but may ultimately lead to changes in the industry's overall structure and dynamics. GVCs for colored gemstones increasingly stretch into the most high-end market segments, and include a movement toward even more in-transparent supply networks based on informal—and sometimes illicit—mining and trading practices.

Empirically, the article takes a *global* view to grasp the ongoing diamond-to-colored stone changes as intertwined with the dialectics of association and dissociation. For the identification of specific practices of association and dissociation, however, our geographic focus is mainly on trading and retail sites in Southeast Asia, focusing on Thailand as a main center for colored gemstone trading within and beyond the Southeast Asian region. Gemstone trade has not least taken place for centuries in the *City of Gems*, Chantaburi in Eastern Thailand. We pay particular attention to gemstones traded in Thailand and mined in Myanmar as one of the world's largest producers (Natural Resource Governance Institute [NRGI] 2018). Myanmar has large deposits of high carat and quality gemstones, and is not least a source for the best and most valuable *pigeon blood* rubies as well as jade. In terms of retail, our empirical focus is chiefly on Singapore, an important market for fine jewelry in the high-end segment of luxury goods sold to domestic consumers and international tourists, and that is now seeing a move toward increased sales of colored stones (Gaitonde 2016; *Channel News Asia* 2018). The article draws on a combination of secondary data (corporate websites, industry reports, academic literature, news features, nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports, etc.) and primary data in the form of qualitative, semistructured interviews and observation conducted in 2017 and 2018. Fieldwork took place in (1) Singapore, through interviews with domestic jewelry retailers, wholesalers, traders, gemologists, international agents, and representatives of business associations; (2) Chantaburi and the wider Bangkok area , through interviews with traders, *gem hunters*, wholesalers, local and international retailers, and sourcing agents; and (3) London, through observation at the Goldsmith's Fair.

The following section develops a conceptual frame for our investigation of geographies of association, dissociation, and valuation in global gemstone value chains. The subsequent sections then provide an analysis of the increasing importance of colored stones as intertwined with geographic association and dissociation, and its links to dis/association, valuation, and trading practices. The conclusions summarize our findings and reflect on their implications for future research.

Geographies of Association, Dissociation, and Valuation

The rise and expansion of the *consumer society* (cf. Baudrillard 2017) in the context of environmentally and socially unsustainable global production means that the commodity as an object of academic enquiry has made a comeback in political economy research; cultural studies; and, not least, economic geography since the 2000s. Commodities are often described as having biographies and geographic lives, with their identities being less certain and more fluid than conventional accounts of commodities as mere objects for exchange would allow (Bridge and Smith 2003). As such, they have become an analytical focus for deeper exploration of the relationships between the cultural, the economic, and the spatial. The study of commodities, their social construction, lives, and circulations also provides an opportunity to further develop geographic imaginations of valuation and valorization processes undertaken by multiple actors at various stages and at various sites in global production networks (cf. Kleibert, Hess, and Müller 2020; Müller, Kleibert, and Ibert 2021).

Commodity production of course involves more than the creation of monetary and exchange value, because the final consumer commodities also have a use value and a symbolic (sign) value (Sayer 2003). In addition to the circuits of capital and matter that production entails, it therefore is necessary to also consider the circuits of meaning associated with particular goods and services, based on their specific cultural and symbolic qualities, which are highly relevant for processes of valuation and their contestation (Hudson 2008; Pike 2015). Practices of value creation and valuation have often been confined to essentialist and naturalized notions of economy and culture. As Best and Paterson (2010) argue, maintaining a clear distinction between the economic and the cultural (as well as the political) requires continuous work to purify each, while at the same time, this work is constantly challenged and destabilized, blurring the boundaries of culture, economy, and politics. It might be more useful, therefore, to investigate the practices of making and unmaking the boundaries between economy, culture, and politics (Ermann, 2011). In a similar vein, Hudson (2008, 438) emphasized the importance of "representing the richness of the economy in terms of the links between the affective, cognitive and material, between circuits of value, meaning and matter, between the moments of production, exchange and consumption and between political economies grounded in different concepts of value and processes of valuation."

This seems particularly pertinent in a sector, such as gemstones and jewelry, in which the exchange value of, for example, rings or necklaces is quite obviously determined not only by the fundamental principles of capitalist production (e.g., labor exploitation in the mining and production process) or the extraction of raw materials (e.g., gold, diamonds) but by their symbolic and sign value (e.g., status, tradition). The places of retailing and the spaces of brands and branding therefore are crucial sites of exchange where the *translation* between use value, symbolic value, and exchange value takes place. As Hudson (2008, 427) put it, "[f]or those commodities sold for final consumption, subsequent processes of consumption ensure that commodities move from the realm of exchange to that of use values." Convincing consumers of the use value of their purchases and translating it into exchange value, which generate profit for the retailer, involves deliberate relational work and processes of valuation. On the one hand, commodities have to become imbued with meaning and laden with symbolic value through branding and marketing efforts (Pike 2013). On the other hand, any association with negative aspects of producing or consuming a commodity—such as social or environmental problems related to the GVC of that commodity—needs to be actively avoided or dissociated (Ibert et al. 2019a). Echoing Bair (2019), we refer to this as the dialectics of association and dissociation, which we argue are underpinning the processes of valuation and value creation in GVCs and playing out at the various sites through which value, meanings, and materials circulate—not least sites of retail and consumption (see also Ponte and Richey 2014; Richey 2019).

As Pike (2015) has very convincingly demonstrated, it often is the geographic origin of a product or service commodity—their origination or provenance—that is emphasized for the purpose of creating symbolic value and thus realizing economic value. This cannot be achieved by brand owners alone, however, but is possible only through the influence of a range of different actors that determine how the geographic in brands and branding comes about. Pike (2015) identifies producers (e.g., brand owners, manufacturers, designers), circulators (such as advertising agencies, media and marketing agencies), consumers (e.g., shoppers, tourists, residents) and regulators (government departments, trademark and intellectual property authorities, among others). This systematic approach to identifying where agency resides in producing geographies of brands and branding is useful and important for analyzing how various circuits of meaning and value unfold. Still, we argue that retailers and traders are missing as important categories of circulators that deserve more attention, especially in industries, such as the gems and jewelry sector, for which symbolic value is crucial but where branding is much less well established than in most other industries (cf. Dauriz, Remy, and Tochtermann 2020).

Not unlike the forging of originations and geographies of association as outlined above, efforts to dissociate a brand, trader, or retailer from the *dark places* of commodity production (Ibert et al. 2019a) are also producing spatially variegated circuits of value and meaning, and particular geographies of dissociation to (re-)establish a brand owner's or circulator's reputational capital. Such efforts involve a range of actors that have an impact on value creation, however in a more antagonistic and contested way, since actors, such as consumer groups and civil society organizations, work to destabilize and challenge markets for commodities that are seen as problematic and unethical. Brands and retailers therefore need to undertake deliberate action to protect their valuation and value generation potential via strategies of dissociation. "Dissociations require pro-active relational work to create desired gaps and omissions in webs of relations and to actively demobilize undesired translations between different registers of value. As such, dissociations are not merely the flipside of the coin (omissions in relational webs of association) but a distinct set of practices that are utilized in the social construction of economic value" (Ibert et al. 2019a, 58). Strategies to achieve this can be either proactive or reactive, and entail various possible practices by retailers and brands that may be mobilized depending on their position in the GVC and what aspects of the circuits of capital, meaning, and material are to be addressed:

First, from a political economy point of view, circuits of capital and value are premised on the commodification and exploitation of labor. With firms competing in markets based on price and quality, brands and retailers develop associative and dissociative strategies and practices that, on the one hand, emphasize the positive aspects of labor (skills, knowledge, and creativity), while, at the same time, obscuring the more problematic aspects of labor exploitation within the firm and its supply network. The former can be achieved through specific marketing strategies while the latter is often, but not always, based on *strategic ignorance* (Ibert et al. 2019a). The strategies and dialectics of association and dissociation regarding labor aspects of valuation also mobilize geography to meet their objectives, by highlighting particular places of origination with desirable connotations (for instance rubies from Myanmar, regarded as being of the highest quality) to justify higher prices, while at the same time creating a knowledge *alibi* by denying knowledge about labor conditions in highly fragmented supply networks, connections to the military junta, or the environmental effects of mining activities. Mainly when pushed by other actors, such as NGOs or consumer groups, do brands and retailers respond, for example, through more or less systematic and efficient corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Bair 2019).

Second, and inextricably linked to circuits of capital and value, circuits of meaning need to be established by retail firms and brands to establish and maintain rents beyond the surplus value extracted from the labor process. Marketing strategies of origination (Pike 2015) arguably are among the most important associative strategies and mobilized at different scales, along with the creation of status markets and symbolic capital. In our empirical analysis of the largely unbranded gemstone and jewelry sector below, we emphasize how, for example, narratives of *adventurous places* may be used not only by the few large brand owners but also by the many smaller retailers and traders (*gemhunters*) to create such circuits of meaning and value for specific gemstones/kinds of gemstones such as *pigeon blood* colored rubies from Myanmar. This in turn is closely linked to dissociation strategies of weakening links to the more problematic aspects of products that carry a high symbolic value. An example of this is the global fur network, where the dialectics of association and dissociation play out in the context of normative struggles over the symbolic and use value of fur and moral questions of animal rights (Kleibert, Hess, and Müller 2020), and the same holds true for global gemstone networks.

Finally, circuits of material and matter play a fundamental role in valuation processes and the related association–dissociation dialectics of brands and retailers (see also Müller, Kleibert, and Ibert 2021 for the example of the fur industry). It is especially in this realm where strategies involving scientific knowledge and expertise are developed to either lend credibility to brands and retailers or to establish and justify knowledge alibis. Valuation in the gems and jewelry sector, as further discussed and analyzed below, depends not only on the symbolic and sign value of particular gemstones but also on using scientific expertise (gemology) to establish the material qualities of a gemstone, such as diamonds or rubies, which have a bearing on the price and are used in marketing strategies. The material qualities of gemstone are ultimately a result of *origination*, that is, the geological and thus specific conditions in the places where gemstones are discovered and mined.

In her recent intervention, Jennifer Bair (2019) summarized the relationship between association and dissociation strategies used by firms in GVCs as ongoing struggles between the two, playing out through the contentious politics of engaged actors. While this provides an important step to conceptualize association and dissociation as dialectic, in our analytical frame developed in this article (see Figure 1), we want to stress the role of origination (Pike 2015) to flesh out more explicitly the intrinsically geographic, place-related dimensions of this dialectic. As discussed above, this is of particular relevance for our analysis of gemstone trading and retail, where the commodity in question has unquestionable place-based, territorial origins (or provenance), but it has also wider application in various other industries and markets. Defining provenance as places of origin, and looking at how actors attempt to create branded commodities based on their geographic origin, "affords explanatory weight to spatial and temporal market situations and the imperatives of accumulation, competition, differentiation and innovation that shape *and disrupt* rather than simply determine the work of brand and branding actors" (Pike 2015,74; emphasis added). It is precisely this disruptive effect that links the relational work of geographic association to strategies of dissociation in a dialectical manner. For example, in the global gemstone sector, brands, such as Tiffany and Co., and circulators, such as small retailers and traders, often attempt to associate commodities from a particular place or territory as being of high quality and desirability (such as pigeon blood color rubies from Myanmar) while at the same time dissociating themselves from the dire working conditions in this place or the fact that some mines (e.g., in Myanmar) are owned by the military. For Tiffany and Co, the dissociation strategy involved a geographic switch in the sourcing of rubies away from Myanmar and emphasizing on their website instead ethical sourcing of rubies from Mozambique (Tiffany and Co. 2017).

There is by now a considerable body of work that has addressed economic and cultural studies of value, including in human geography (cf. Bridge and Smith 2003; Cook et al. 2006; Pike 2015; Pani 2017; Ibert et al. 2019a, 2019b; Kleibert, Hess, and Müller 2020; Müller, Kleibert, and Ibert 2021). As Bigger and Robertson (2017, 71) argue, a process-oriented understanding of commodities “reminds us that nothing, be it cultural or natural, is intrinsically valuable; value is found, affirmed, realized, or destroyed through ongoing social performances of comparison and measure [. . .] different regimes of valuation may be used in different moments, and considerable tension is observed when such valuation practices change.” In addition to the material value based on measurable qualities of gemstones and jewelry, actors in the industry also construct and mobilize originations and geographic dissociations to enhance the exchange value and establish a higher price. Origination is of course deeply entangled with material quality to determine exchange value at the points of trading and retail, but it also relies heavily on symbolic value (the immaterial value attributed to an object or a commodity such as gemstones) and sign value (the value arising from differentiation, for instance, as a marker of wealth or class), which must also be created by actors.

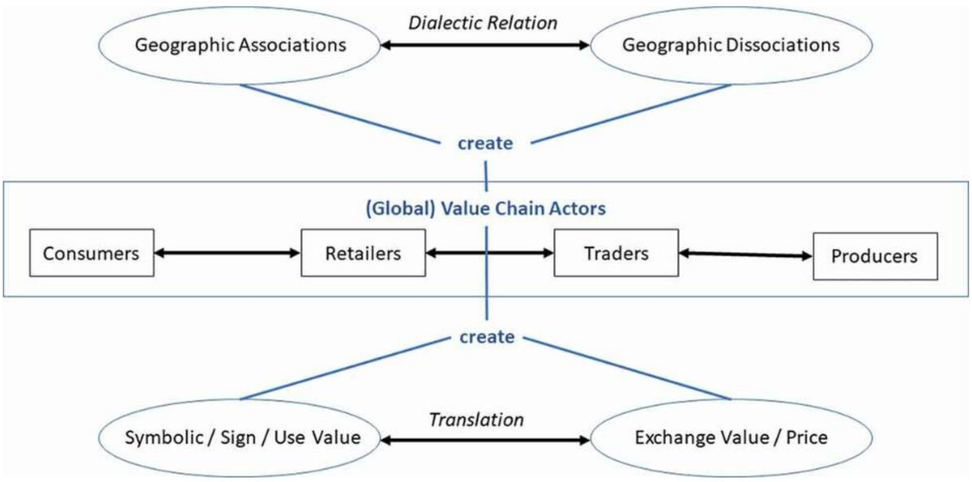

Figure 1. Valuation and dis/association: A framework.

It is not least through the work of originating, associating, and dissociating that actors translate between different forms of value, in an ongoing process of valuation (see Figure 1). In Marxist theory, commodities have both an exchange value, assessed quantitatively, and a use value that is assessed qualitatively. What Baudrillard (1981) adds to this distinction is the argument that use value has become ever more imbued with sign value and symbolic value (Ibert et al. 2019b), not least in the context of commodities, such as gemstones and jewelry, as discussed in the following sections. As Zander (2014, 395) put it, “Baudrillard’s gift to us—Marxian value theory with semiotics added—is arguably not new […]. The contribution of Baudrillard’s early work rather lies in explicating a framework of value logics in which economy, utility, signification, and the ambivalent and irrational are all present." We now turn to the analysis of geographic association–dissociation and valuation in the gemstone and jewelry sector.

Gemstone Valuation, Materiality, and Circuits of Meaning

Valuation of a finished piece of fine jewelry is from the outset based on standardized metrics of its constituent ingredients such as particular gemstones and metals. Carat (not to be confused with *karat* that measures the purity of gold) is a measure of weight—one carat being 200 milligrams (Gemselect n.d.). Hence, gemstones are commonly determined by weight rather than by size, even if the size of the stone on an engagement ring may be seen as directly associable with value and wealth and as a symbol of status. Still, the exchange value is far from fixed but varies enormously according to a variety of other factors. These include the so-called 4Cs for gemstone valuation, namely, cut, clarity, carat, and color (Gemsociety, n.d.; CT Diamond Museum n.d.; Gilbertson 2018). Valuation metrics are more or less agreed upon—although more clearly for carat (weight as a constant) than for clarity, which may be somehow standardized but is ultimately rather idiosyncratic. Thus, gemstone valuation also becomes a subjective discipline, and specific stones may be assessed differently by different actors, such as retailers and the different traders involved, meaning that the value of a gemstone may change continuously through the process. Valuation based on the 4Cs, especially of those stones that are likely to be considered most valuable at a particular time, is therefore also often the result of bargaining processes in the networks in which they are traded, whereas a gemstone's value comes to reflect the gemological skills, perception of clarity and beauty, and also the bargaining power of traders in informal trading networks.

Furthermore, the value of a gemstone is highly symbolic, as well as culturally specific (see, e.g., Pointon 2009), emphasizing how its exchange value is imbued with symbolic value. Cultural preferences play a particularly important role for the creation of symbolic meaning and value of stones, metals, and finished jewelry. They have a strong bearing on the ways in which consumers perceive gemstone and jewelry products, and their cultural meanings (Burt, Johansson, and Dawson 2017). Particular gemstones are associated with positive cultural connotations and have thus become highly valuable in some cultures, but not necessarily in others, which chimes with Bigger and Robertson's (2017) call for a process-oriented understanding of commodities for which value is entangled with ongoing social processes, while regimes of valuation may be used in different moments. Jade, and *Burmese Jadite* in particular, is a good example of how a commodity's valuation regime is not merely utilized in particular moments but also in particular places. Jade is unique in being much higher valued and appreciated in Asia—not least in Mainland China—than in the rest of the world, symbolizing virtues such as courage, wisdom, and modesty (European Gemological Laboratory n.d.; Hughes et al. 2000). During fieldwork conducted for this article, jade was frequently mentioned by jewelry retailers and gemstone traders as an exceptionally valuable commodity when directed toward the Mainland Chinese market or toward Mainland Chinese tourists in Singapore. This manifested itself in clear marketing strategies of associating jade with its cultural meaning and symbolic value, underlined in Singapore by jade-selling retailers largely being located in China Town to further accentuate the associations between this particular gemstone and Chinese culture. This linking to Chinese culture, and to the place and history of Singapore, was not only utilized in relation to visitors from Mainland China who are, according to respondents, those customers that buy the most, not least in terms of high product value. It also targeted Western tourists looking for meaningful and authentic souvenirs to remind them of the equally authentic place they visited (see e.g., Waitt 2000; Urry 2002; Thomsen 2018). Such practices of highlighting the symbolic value of gems and jewelry products do at the same time, more or less deliberately, overshadow and thus dissociate any negative connotations of the products. The interconnection between gemstones' (and gold's) symbolic/sign value, and the exchange value of the jewelry that contains it was often pinpointed by respondents, for example, by one CEO of a major jewelry retail chain in Singapore:

> There are a lot of things in the different cultures in Singapore that makes jewelry an important business. For example, some people believe they should have a specific number of gold pieces before they are ready to get married, and diamonds are important to them too. There is also the meaning of birthstones. So because of these matters we can sell double digit customized products. (Interview, fine specialty jeweler, November 7, 2017)

Symbolic value and sign value (and ultimately exchange value) is highly interrelated with the geographic associations emerging within and between the different nodes of a particular jewelry GVC (see Figure 1). Circuits of meaning have also historically been cleverly established in the jewelry industry, which is a key example of how commodities and consumer goods (finished jewelry) may be strategically associated with positive matters by corporations to increase product value. Jewelry corporations do not least have a history of very effectively associating jewelry gifts with important life occasions and celebrations such as marriage, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, and even the increasingly commodified International Women's Day. This is probably best illustrated by how diamonds became established as the most valuable and desirable stone. After being contained in only some 20 percent of engagement rings before World War II, this number had risen to more than 80 percent by the end of the 1990s (Francis-Tan and Mialon 2015). The near-monopoly of De Beers in the diamond industry (see Henn 2012), as noted above, has had a clear and direct impact on the value of diamonds, since a notion of (and an association with) scarcity was created. Thus, the image of diamonds as a rare and scarce commodity (and of origin in remote places) was maintained over time. This valorization strategy was in turn combined with advertising campaigns, initially in North America, that created a status market with clear associations between diamonds and *true love*, and not least between the size of the diamond in a finger ring and the love of a man for his fiancée (Knight and Stevenson 1986; Read and Janse 2009; Goldschein 2011; Friedman 2015).

Rarity is also essential to valuation of colored gemstones. A gemstone's symbolic and sign value, and thus its exchange value, often increases if it is rare. Not least does a single origin (such as Tanzanite from Tanzania) heighten the value of a stone tremendously. Rarity in turn has a clear connection to scarcity. Gems may be scarce in nominal terms, not least due to unsustainable and often illicit overexploitation, or in the market due to valorization processes and limited physical accessibility and geographic origin in places that are considered remote and dark. In the latter case rarity rather than scarcity is highlighted as a value determinant. An example is Painite found in primary gem deposits in Mogok, Myanmar (Thu and Zaw 2017; Clark 2021; International Gem Society 2021). Geographic origination is thus intrinsically important for the creation of symbolic and sign value of gemstones, due to the grounded origination of stones as well as the correlation between the 4Cs and geological origin (Altingoz et al. 2019), and provenance remains an important marketing tool in the industry. Highly connected to the aspects of place and origination is geographic dissociation. Geographic dis/associations are the focal point of the following section, in which we also further demonstrate their links with the rising popularity and use of colored gemstones.

Geographic Dis/Association and the Rise of the Colored Gemstone Industry

The value of diamonds has been challenged ever since harms in places where diamonds are mined were revealed to the world, and civil society organizations added a fifth C, for conflict, to the four Cs for gemstone valuation (see Bieri 2013). According to Wright (2004), the diamond industry subsequently realized that it could not at the same time maintain value and be associated with conflict in supplier countries. As the links between political and social conflict and the diamond industry were increasingly exposed, marketing of diamonds as rare and originating in remote and exciting places at least temporarily lost its leverage, calling for value restoration. Subsequently, new industry practices and strategies have emerged within the diamond sector, interconnected with the upsurge in colored stone. First and foremost, a multilateral initiative encompassing large corporations, government, and civil society organizations emerged, namely, the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS) for conflict diamonds. The purpose of this initiative was to secure and certify conflict free diamonds, defined as "rough diamonds used to finance wars against governments" (KimberleyProcess n.d.; see also Wright 2004; Roy 2017; Beevers 2019). Thus, KPCS was very clearly focused on origination of diamonds in particular nation-states and territories, and not least on a process of adding/retaining the value of diamonds by dissociating them from places of conflict through the use of certification. In the realms of the KPCS, some degree of formalization and policy development did occur in the diamond sector (Shortell and Irwin

2017). Still, the website of the KPCS reveals that fake certificates are commonly in circulation (Kimberley Process n.d.), questioning the backbone of the initiative itself, namely the reliability of its traceability scheme. This was also stressed during fieldwork conducted for this article by a couple of retailers and a former international sourcing agent of a major international jewelry corporation. They all pointed to a variety of strategies of reexporting and repackaging of diamonds in illicit networks as an occurring problem that obscures traceability and aims to hide diamonds' origination in places of conflict. A similar critique of the scheme's effectiveness in terms of safeguarding conflict-free diamond trade has previously been raised by researchers that also point to a lack of success in lowering high levels of illicit trade (see Beevers 2019). It has also been pointed out that consumers may think they are buying an entirely ethical product given its certificate, though it does merely (or at least expectantly) certify the stone's origin, and is not concerned with, for example, hazardous working conditions in diamond mines (Schroeder 2010; Munier 2015; Roy 2017). The guaranteed conflict-free certificate thus also becomes what Ibert et al. (2019a) labeled strategic ignorance—in this case of labor exploitation. As such, certification schemes may therefore represent (or support) association–dissociation dialectics aiming at adding or retaining value of particular products, since they highlight action taken to solve certain problems (like conflict), while removing attention from other problems (like working conditions, child labor, and environmental problems in mines).

The rising popularity of colored gemstones is clearly connected to the difficulties of preserving the image and value of diamonds; it is a way of dissociating those problems that have become revealed to consumers in the diamond sector, by focusing on other gemstones for which similar problems are not (yet) revealed, to such an extent that consumers are aware of them (see also Wiseman 2019). This rising popularity of colored gemstones was often stressed by retailers and wholesalers in Singapore. Interestingly, they did not see this upsurge as a new trend, but rather as a reemergence of colored stones in a domestic market that had been captured under Western influence, and *colonialized* to focus narrowly on diamonds. They also often linked this to how the relatively high value of diamonds was in their opinion, and contrary to the value of colored stones, artificial, as explained by the CEO of one of Singapore's largest domestic jewelry brands:

> We use many different stones not just diamonds, we do not think they are more important than other stones. I find it really interesting what the De Beers family did with the diamond monopoly. They "showed" the Asians a demand for diamonds, in many ways they colonized the world to think that diamonds are the only stone for weddings and so on, and that diamonds are very rare—actually they are not really rare. They are also very easily replicated. For example, the aquamarines that we use

are much more complicated to make by humans. (Interview, high-end fine jewelry retailer, November 6, 2017)

While colored stones have been relatively important in Asia for ages, holding exchange and investment value as well as symbolic value, a growing consumption of colored stones in Western societies also occurs, including in mid- and high-end markets, and not merely in those *New Age* niche markets in which they have to some extent resided (see Shortell and Irwin 2017; Wiseman 2019).

No large-scale initiative similar to that of the Kimberley Process has so far been initiated in the colored gemstone sector, for which trade and production remain highly dispersed and unregulated (Shortell and Irwin 2017). Thus, the origin of colored gemstones was often not known by respondents (this will be discussed in more detail below). Exceptions included gemstones whose place specificity was high such as, for example, high-quality rubies from Myanmar. A tendency for both jewelry traders and retailers to dissociate product portfolios from *dark* places was detected during fieldwork. One example is an international trader in rough and processed gemstones interviewed in Bangkok. He said,

> It is always difficult to know where the stones we buy and sell originally come from, especially for colored stones. I surely would emphasize to my clients if they come from Australia—and some of them do—but not if they come from Burma or perhaps from the Congo. (Interview, gemstone trader and retailer, October 20, 2017)

This practice of geographic dissociation was clearly dependent on the type and level of sustainability engagement of customers or markets. Dissociating gemstones from place is in itself a rather peculiar practice, given that they are often literally grounded in supply regions and thus place-specific by default. The shift toward increased use of colored stones in the global industry therefore also entails that corporations source stones to a larger degree in more complex chains that entangle with a myriad of trading networks. These entanglements are our focal point in the following section.

Trading Networks, Retail and Geographic Dis/Association

The gemstone and jewelry GVC contains a variety of nodes, of which only some are shown in Figure 1 for clarity. In and between these GVC nodes, numerous complex trading networks, which have received little attention in GVC research, exist. Such trading networks, involve the traveling of gemstones across multiple geographic scales and also numerous actors in (and from) different places. Both formal and illicit trade takes place and connects gemstone supplier countries, such as Myanmar, into regional and GVCs. In the colored gemstone sector, value creation and valuation is intertwined with this complexity and nontransparency.

In gemstone processing, such as heating and cutting of rough stones, an important role is played by Thailand and not least by the region and City of Gems of Chantaburi, which was historically an important gemstone mining area. As local mines dried out, Chantaburi evolved into a major gems center for trading and processing (Unninayar n.d.), bearing some resemblance with the emergence of diamond processing centers such as the Palanpuris diamond cutting cluster in India (Henn 2012). According to a representative of Chantaburi Gemstone Traders Association most gemstones traded globally will travel through Chantaburi sooner or later. Between gemstone mining and gemstone processing, trading in rough stones takes place, not least in Chantaburi's highly international and dynamic market place. It involves the famous *weekend gemstone market*, and import/export, wholesale, and retail stores located in the city center and in the numerous stalls in a large building belonging to the traders' association. After processing, the gemstones once again enter into a myriad of overlapping networks. Two overall patterns detected during our fieldwork stand out as particularly important, since they show how these trading networks obscure traceability of stones that enter i regional and global markets: First, traders from various countries regionally and globally, not least in Africa, trade rough stones. This includes that international traders sell gemstones that they brought with them from their home countries. Also, gem traders residing in Chantaburi travel to other places, again often in Africa, to buy stones of, for example, Tanzanian origin to be processed and either retailed or retraded in Chantaburi. Second, important connections exist locally between Chantaburi and (1) the export processing zone *Gemopolis* in the outskirts of Bangkok that is designated to jewelry processing; and (2) the jewelry quarter in Bangkok, where stones that have been traded (and often processed) in Chantaburi are either retraded by wholesalers to domestic and international traders or used for fine jewelry processing and retail locally.

Traders and retailers in Asia (and beyond) use the fragmented trading system and highly international trading centers, such as Chantaburi, as places of bundling and unbundling their gemstone sources, while, for example, still offering gems likely to have been sourced from Myanmar and displaying their associated qualities. This was done to such an extent that gems were sometimes falsely associated with Myanmar, that is, they were claimed to be rubies from Myanmar (as a marketing strategy), while they were indeed more likely be heat treated and less valuable locally mined stones, according to gemologists and gemstone processors interviewed. Moreover, some traders—in our sample these were foreigners living in Thailand—were often referred to, and referred to themselves as Gem Hunters during interviews—a title strongly associated with the adventure and mystery of remote places and the gemstones these places contain. During interviews and observation of traders, these foreigners emphasized how they traded in unique and highly valuable stones deriving from remote places. They did not try to hide a gemstone's origin in a dark place (such as an embargoed country). On the contrary, origination in such places was deliberately highlighted and used as a value determinant by emphasizing the sense of uniqueness, rarity, and mysteriousness of the gemstone that was targeting the very high-end markets for jewelry. It is worth noting that such practices of associating particular stones with remoteness and adventure sometimes parallels practices of dissociating stones from the very same place. A place may at the same time be subject to opposing views of them as either mysterious and exciting and shady and dark by various traders or consumer segments, and origination in a specific place may thus increase or decrease product value. Processes of associating and dissociating particular places—along with the very same stones and mining practices they contain—may occur simultaneously in different strands of the GVC, involving different traders and retailers, and pertain to different markets segments with diverse degrees of responsibility concerns.

Further downstream, retailers and wholesalers interviewed in Singapore mentioned that consumer awareness of problems pertaining to diamonds is rising in Singapore. Still, only few of these respondents were at the time of fieldwork considering working with diamond standard and traceability schemes. Instead, they saw a (partial) shift toward use of colored stones as a necessary consequence of the revealed problems caused by the diamond industry as a relatively simple, and probably relatively short sighted, shift toward using materials that are not (yet) targeted by civil society organizations to a high degree. Since the colored stone strand of the gems and jewelry GVC has not been subjected yet to attention from civil society organizations and media to the same extent as diamonds, it was seen as a *safe haven*. Though an awareness of rising consumer demand for transparency and sustainability was noted amongst retailers in Singapore, it was clear that they overall were more focused on the quality of the gemstones they sourced and the economic risk in transactions. One example is a Singaporean retailer who sources a variety of colored gemstones by personally going to Bangkok to buy stones from importers and wholesalers, who had usually bought them at the gem market in Chantaburi. When asked why the retailer did not go to Chantaburi personally to buy the stones and thereby save the commission to the wholesaler, she replied,

> We buy the stones in Bangkok. This is often in Silom, and I will go from one shop to the other to buy. I know which sellers to trust and where the price is good (. . .). I do not go to Chantaburi. I prefer letting other people do the dirty work. (Interview, fine specialty jeweler, November 7, 2017).

When asked to elaborate, the retailer stressed that she felt that working in Chantaburi was possibly dangerous, since the traders there are trading with Myanmar, which she saw as possibly problematic and involving danger, and also as unethical, since mines are associated with the military. Thus, she preferred buying from a wholesaler in Bangkok in her own personal psychological dissociation from the possible problems pertaining to stones that she was nevertheless buying.

Besides buying gemstones from traders within the Southeast Asian region, Singaporean retailers also source from international traveling gemstone traders seeking out jewelry corporations in Singapore. The latter were described by one jewelry retailer (Interview, high-end fine jewelry retailer, November 6, 2017) as a "man with a very valuable suitcase" coming directly and regularly to his door, while the sample gemstones presented were a mix of "all kinds of stones from all possible places", again meaning that tracing their origin is hardly possible. This representative of a large-scale, fine jewelry retailer also explained how he sees these traders as his regular connections, who know his demands for quality and price, and with whom he has built up mutual trust that secures smooth transactions and eases replenishment of similar stones to be delivered fast and in large volume by paying up front in deals based on a handshake only:

> The gem traders that come here are from all over the world. Trade is always just done by handshake in this industry. The trade is controlled—I couldn't really put my finger on how this works, but it does. There is a bond between people in the industry and it is very reputation based. (Interview, high-end fine jewelry retailer, November 6, 2017)

Sourcing systems were also generally described as a network for trading inputs of high value and based on a very high degree of trust in transactions. It was stressed that trading is highly informal and noncontractual, even by some of the large-scale domestic retailers. CEOs (or their managers) are often trained as gemologists and thus able to handpick what they consider the best and most valuable stones for customized pieces of jewelry, and bargain the price based on their own valuation of the gemstones. The retailers interviewed were, not least due to this sourcing system, commonly uncertain of the origin of the gemstones they sourced, including for high-end fine jewelry. A rising pressure on corporations to present jewelry made of traceable and sustainable stones was sometimes mentioned during interviews in Singapore. Practices in this context include referring to *experts* claiming traceability, though based on the stones' material qualities, this is impossible in many cases, and given the fragmented supply chains, this provides a perfect knowledge alibi (Ibert el al. 2019a) for retailers. The fact that materials science (in this case gemology) is not always able to reliably determine the geographic origin of a particular stone is thus sometimes used by retailers strategically to blame a lack in traceability of gemstones along the multiple stages of formal and illicit trading. Hence, they distance themselves from any responsibility for social and environmental problems in the mining locations—in the case of

Myanmar ultimately poverty, social injustice, and conflict (NRGI 2018). As mentioned above, the dark side of ruby mining, processing, and distribution has lately led a few international jewelry corporations to declare that they would no longer source rubies from Myanmar, where the military was heavily involved in controlling the mining sites, long before the recent coup. Still, the pigeon blood rubies are in high demand, and this change of (known) sourcing destination tends to affect the geographies and organization of GVCs for jewelry in at least two ways. First, it has contributed to further unregulated (artisan and corporate) mining and trade of Myanmar's rubies through neighboring countries, including Thailand, and onward to the global market (NRGI 2018). Second, rubies are increasingly traded on exchanges and online. Both tendencies demonstrate the need for the analysis of corporations' sourcing practices in networks and GVCs through the lens of geographies of association and dissociation.

Conclusions

This article has investigated the gemstone and jewelry industry that provides a useful example for substantiating how processes of valuation *translate* between registers of value and associated practices of dis/association. It has examined how the valuation of gemstones and jewelry involve complex and multiscalar relational associative and dissociative practices, embracing measures of metrics and symbolic/sign value, and is influenced by the skills, bargaining power, and perceptions of traders along the GVC. This article has made both a conceptual and empirical contribution to research on geographies of valuation, association, and dissociation. First, we have developed a conceptual framework for investigating interrelations between valuation and the geographies of dis/association, often linked to discourses of *responsible consumption and production*. The article has contributed to the extant literature by substantiating how processes of valuation entangle with geographies of dis/association in a dialectical manner. Thus, we have pushed further the concept of dialectics of association and dissociation, and addressed epistemological tensions by developing a systematic account of the association–dissociation dialectic and underlying theories of value. More specifically, we have conceptually integrated, in a novel way, the construction of exchange value in the gems and jewelry sector as established in political economy with the symbolic sphere of value claims. By drawing on the early work of Baudrillard, together with Marxian value theory, this enables new insights into valuation processes in GVCs.

Second, we have contributed to the geographies of dissociation and association literatures by showing how independent gemstone trade and small-scale retail constitute important sites of association, dissociation, and valuation of colored gemstones. In global/regional value chains for colored gemstones and jewelry, which remain largely unbranded, the so-called global lead firms are generally not significant, and a variety of the gemstone and jewelry traders and retailers enact dis/association dialectics in the valuation process. We have identified the specific practices of dis/association and valuation by actors in multiscalar and complex trading and retail networks that hitherto received little attention in GVC research. Our contribution here is novel in the ways in which it foregrounds the importance and capabilities of retailers and traders for value creation, enhancement, and capture beyond lead firms—matters that are commonly neglected in GVC literature. The retail and consumption landscapes of gems and jewelry are highly fragmented, and in the relative absence of large specialist retailers and global brand narratives, the work of association and dissociation is also done by smaller retailers as well as a large number of traders that provide nodes of dis/association and valuation in the industry.

Third, we have highlighted the significance of geography and *place* in the gemstone and jewelry sector, and the relation to dis/associations. The *grounded* and place-specific nature of gemstones, on the one hand, makes provenance a marketing tool aimed at creating symbolic value with and the end to maximizing exchange value. At the same time, the fact that gemstones often are inevitably linked to origination in dark places is potentially problematic for retail sales and therefore needs dissociation. We have shown how this sometimes leads to parallel practices of associating *known* origination in particular gemstone supply regions with the mysterious and exciting while hiding the problems pertaining to the industry in that same region. In the gemstone and jewelry sector, place thus becomes an aspect of association as well as dissociation practices—sometimes even of the very same place.

Finally, our analysis has shown how knowing the origination of colored gemstones is often impossible. The surge in the popularity of colored stones, which are often branded as sustainable, involve nontransparent, complex, and unregulated supply networks. The rising use of colored gemstones—and concurrent decreasing prominence of diamonds—has thus been highlighted here as involving an escape from *known* problems. Our analysis has demonstrated how dissociative practices are therefore not necessarily *only* hiding problems within existing GVCs, but may ultimately also change their structure and dynamics at a regional and global scale by further intertwining with formal and informal trading networks, and by increasing trading on exchanges in financial centers. In the colored gemstone sector, value creation and valuation are thus highly intertwined with this complexity and nontransparency. Still, more research is needed to reveal the consequences of this shift, for example, for mining communities, workers, and the environment, and for future traceability challenges of the different strands of the gemstone and jewelry industry.

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