# Inalienability as Reciprocity: An Essay on Kinship

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ABSTRACT

*Reciprocity lies at the heart of the influential theory of gift exchange proposed by Marcel Mauss a century ago. Seventy years later, Annette Weiner's theory of inalienable possessions offered an important critique of the Maussian tradition's emphasis on reciprocity: for Weiner, it was time to pay attention to human efforts to hold back precious objects from the demands of exchange. This essay revisits Weiner's dialogue with Mauss to argue that her contribution is most fruitfully read as a transgenerational extension of his thought rather than its abrogation. This is done through a slow synthetic rereading of aspects of the gift exchange literature, with particular attention to the work of Maurice Godelier, and its application to the itinerary of a family object.*

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*For the Webers and the Rotenbergs,*

*by way of the Biedermans*

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*They were lovely people. When your mother was born,*

*they gave her the most beautiful gift. I forget what it was.*

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I have a dollar that I keep in a spare wallet. It lives in a clear plastic pouch that someone threaded at the opening with a red string. Folded up as it is, the dollar bill looks like any other. Removed from its refuge and unfolded, it takes an attentive eye to read the tell-tale signs of its age: the distinctive floral curlicues around the border, the notice that it is redeemable in silver, and the series number marked 1935.

Some years ago, when she was well into her 80s, my grandfather's first cousin Blanka gave this little package to me. In her deliberate, lilting French edged with trilled r's, she explained that when she and her husband and her brother arrived in France after the war, my great-grandparents, scouring the New York papers for a sign that any relatives from Poland had survived, wrote them. In their letter, they included this dollar. While my great-grandmother never had the chance to see her brother's two surviving children (there had been six), she and her husband and adult children were able to send money to help them establish new lives. Beginning a few decades later, the cousins came to know one another through visits to Paris and New York. During my own travels, I in turn got to know these relatives, including the subsequent generations born in France. During one visit shortly after my grandfather died, Blanka decided to pass the dollar on to me. And to give it a home, she also gave me a black wallet from her leather goods shop in Boulogne.

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I would like to think through this relic and its movements in relation to some classic conversations about the gift that have taken place in and around anthropology. Some would say this is a foolhardy endeavor. The gift is at the root of a huge and unruly literature about exchange that in some respects exemplifies how much of anthropological theory works: there are certain founding texts and thinkers, overlaid with a dense, ragged accumulation of exegesis, overlaid with a deadening uncertainty about what to do with it all. For anthropologists (though less so for sociologists), the topic's "sacred text...treated with reverential awe" (Parry, 1986, p. 455) is Marcel Mauss's 1925 Essay on the Gift. Many have pored over what Mauss was really driving at in this terse, enigmatic study, convinced that some part of something like the truth is found there. A

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few have admitted that they find Mauss incoherent or distracting and have sought alternative paradigms (Ekeh, 1974, p. 196; Strathern, 1999, pp. 136-158). Even for anthropologists who pay little attention to Mauss or the gift, traces of the text are strewn about the disciplinary field. The upshot is that the gift and its accompanying vocabulary of reciprocity, hau, potlatch, kula, self-interest, and generosity saturate anthropology, but that it can be daunting to say anything specific about it. Seemingly everywhere, it can also seem to be nowhere. And when a substantial chunk of the debate pokes through the surface, there can be the feeling that it is best to steer clear, as if the protuberance wears a notice reading "do not disturb."

This is a pity, because Mauss and the debates that followed still have much to teach us, including about how processes that we intuitively understand, such as the foregoing transmission of an antique dollar, come to take place in the world. While David Graeber (2011, pp. 405n21, 115) has argued that reciprocity is so ubiquitous a phenomenon and so flexible a concept as to lose its analytic usefulness, one can also follow what Graeber did rather than what Graeber said: we can demand a still more careful thinking through of what reciprocity is and how it works. And as someone who thinks of Mauss's argument as provisional and who imagines that he would have been horrified at the prospect of being frozen in reverential awe, I also think Mauss would want to learn from us.

But if so, how to find a way in? On such well-trodden but tangled terrain, it is sometimes best to approach things obliquely, or even against the grain. My first serious engagement with the classic literature on the gift happened to be by way of a critique of Mauss. Annette Weiner's late work, summed up in her 1992 book Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving, was a self-conscious challenge to the Maussian tradition that drew on its author's ethnographic fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands (one of the key locations discussed by Mauss), her reading of the wider ethnographic literature on exchange and kinship in other contexts in Oceania, and broader treatments of exchange in European social thought. Whereas Mauss and his earlier readers emphasized the social bonds built up through reciprocal gift exchange---Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) would go so far as to cast the incest taboo and the resulting pattern of exogamy as the breakthrough from nature to culture---Weiner focused on what was held back from exchange. For her, these kept things, so hard to notice

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ethnographically, were the real protagonists in exchange: it is in trying to keep these things from being lost to others that other things come to be exchanged (1992, p. 43). Eventually these inalienable possessions come to stand for the possessor's own self.

If this demotion of reciprocity to secondary status is not already ambitious enough, Weiner's theory extends into the realms of gender and kinship. The invisibility of inalienable possessions, she argued, stemmed in large part from the failure of male ethnographers to see women, who she held are often the makers and keepers of inalienable possessions. Weiner further argued that the Levi-Straussian emphasis on women as objects of matrimonial exchange between male-dominated groups masked the vitality and importance of the brother-sister tie (1992, p. 73). The ideal of endogamy had not been banished by the incest taboo after all, but instead still resides at the heart of human culture, hidden beneath the officially sanctioned ideal of marrying out (1992, pp. 94-96).

Reactions to Weiner's intervention were polarized. While some regional specialists found her work to be exciting, a good number challenged her readings of contexts beyond the Trobriand Islands (Foster, 1995; Mosko, 2000; Valeri, 1994). Other scholars challenged her mainly on grounds of theory (Friedman, 1995, p. 121; Graeber, 2001, pp. 34-35, 164). Many ignored her. Weiner's argument met with greater success rather far from the context it was written about, as it was taken up by researchers working on questions of patrimony and hoarding largely in nation-state contexts in the Americas (Lomnitz-Adler, 2001; Sansi, 2016), Europe (Franquesa, 2013), and Africa and the Middle East (Glasser 2016; Glasser 2020; Moumtaz, 2023; Peebles, 2014; Weiss, 1997). As one of those researchers, I can attest to its charms. In thinking about practices that were conceived as a national, regional, and sometimes familial patrimony, I seemed to be encountering something not unlike the kinds of objects Weiner described: hoarded things said to express a collective essence, passed down from generation to generation, hedged about with the pathos of endangerment and fragility.

But let us engage in some non-generosity for a moment. Do we really need Weiner's theory to get at this sort of thing? Weiner's framework drew attention to a neglected phenomenon and inserted it within a longstanding, prestigious conversation close to the heart of anthropological theory. But we probably do not need anything too fancy to

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grasp that some things are precious to people, who often come to see themselves as embodied in those things. And while it might be refreshing to take such embodiment seriously, in some contexts such a move might also naturalize nationalist mythmaking.[1] The suspicion that the use of Weiner might not be adding much is deepened by the fact that few who invoke her theory actually engage with her central argument: that the effort to keep precious possessions from loss gives rise to compensatory acts of giving.

And no wonder, because at least at its surface, this aspect of Weiner's argument is not very coherent. It might be possible to think of this as a just-so story about the origins of exchange and of the value form: once there were people who cherished certain objects, and then they made things on the model of those objects so they might engage in exchange with others without losing what they cherished. But it is difficult to imagine an actual system of value in which there is not a hierarchy of values. To judge an object valuable and to identify with it sounds much like the same thing, and either way, I am more likely to try to keep such a thing, while more readily relinquishing something I value less (Graeber, 2001, 35). After all, if we accept that some objects are so valuable as to stand for the subject, I would not be so foolhardy as to part with an aspect of myself if I can help it. And as long as there is someone to engage in exchange, there will be something (the "one" in someone) that is held back.[2]

But let us be generous, because I think Weiner is getting at important points despite the leaps. To get at these points, however, will require reading the argument slowly, and in a manner that she would not have appreciated at the time: as an extension of Mauss rather than as his foil.[3] Maurice Godelier (1999, 2002) has already taken several crucial steps in this direction in his sympathetic reading of Weiner, and I would like to retrace and occasionally clarify those synthesizing steps. For Godelier, inalienable possessions make most sense when considered within a wider field of exchange, one that includes both gifts and commodities. In order to differentiate and connect all three kinds---commodities, gifts, and sacred objects (his preferred term for inalienable possessions)---Godelier differentiates between alienability and alienatedness. The latter is about use and movement in space, in the sense that an alienated object changes hands. Alienability, on the other hand, is about the memorial, valuative aspect of the object---in other words, it is about rightful ownership (2002, p. 34).[4]

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Combined, these two axes allow Godelier to build a typology. Thus "[selling] means completely separating the thing from the person," meaning the commodity is both "alienable and alienated." Giving, by contrast, "means maintaining something of the person [who gave it] in the thing given"---the gift is therefore "inalienable but alienated." Finally, "keeping means not separating the thing from the person, because in this union resides the affirmation of a historical identity that must be passed on"; sacred objects are, then, "inalienable and unalienated" (2002, p. 34). A somewhat simpler way to think about this is in terms of context and separation from context. Following Graeber (2011, pp. 144-146), for something to be saleable, there needs to be decontextualization, both from the person who is the owner and their social environs; here recontextualization is baked in. In giving, there is controlled recontextualization, in which the link to the proximate source is preserved (more on this momentarily). In the case of the sacred object, the thing remains maximally tied to its context, in the sense of who uses it and its physical location; in fact, in many cases, the sacred object is hidden away or buried. In Mauss's terms, it is the most total of "total social facts" (2016, p. 193).[5]

Godelier's decomposition of "alienatedness" and "alienability" might on its face be confusing, but it is really about the dual aspects of the object---on the one hand, its status as a brute thing that can be traced in space, and on the other hand, its connection to a seemingly absent subject. In this, Godelier does not stray far from Mauss and his preoccupation with the relation of subject to object, person to thing. Read in Godelier's terms, in the case of the gift, a thing is alienated from partner 1 in its transfer to partner 2. But the thing keeps its association with partner 1, which is why Godelier says it is alienated but inalienable. On its face, this is very similar to a loan. But unlike in a loan, there is usually no expectation that the thing itself will be returned to partner 1. In fact, the usual expectation is that it will not be returned in its original form, but that partner 2 will give something of roughly equivalent value to partner 1.

Mauss may have professed puzzlement about the return (2016, p. 58), but between the lines he gave a pretty clear sense of why there should be a compulsion to return not the original object itself but rather something else of approximately equal or greater value: the given object extends the subject, in the sense that memory of its source cleaves to it, so that it is not a stretch to say that subject and object commingle in the act of

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giving. It is as if partner 1 captures partner 2---an encompassment that can potentially be read as aggressive, but that can also be read as a sacrificial entrusting of an aspect of partner 1 to partner 2.[6] Either way, the gift exchange is not fully established, nor a provisional sense of balance restored, until partner 2 gives something in return. This thing likewise retains its link to the giver, resulting in mutual capture, mutual entrusting. In other words, the exchange of these roughly equivalent objects, each of them commingled with the subject who gave them, has now brought about the partial commingling of two subjects---we might even say the cooperative initiation of something like a new subject.[7] In Godelier's reading, this transfer from partner 2 to partner 1 is less a cancellation of a debt than it is an addition to the balance (2002, pp. 25-26). And so on, for as long as the partners to the exchange are able and willing.[8]

But following Godelier's own logic, to say that the gift is alienated is not entirely true. One of the most famous passages in Mauss, drawn from the teachings of the Māori elder Tāmati Ranapiri, dwells on the obligations of partner 2 to partner 1 should partner 2 use what they received to turn around and engage in exchange with a partner 3.[9] While some of the most recondite debates in exchange theory hinge on how to interpret this much-cited passage, a fairly straightforward reading is that what is gained from partner 3 needs to be conveyed back to partner 1, on the principle that "one man's gift should not be another man's capital" (Sahlins, 1972, p. 160). This is not unrelated to a common practice within gift exchange's dyadic form: at least in the places where I have lived, the gifted thing (with the exception of many gifts of money) cannot be disposed of as the recipient pleases. In other words, just as it retains a tie to the giver, the given thing becomes tied to its receiver, turning it into a kept thing; having been alienated in the giving, it is not to be alienated again.

So I would say the subject-object interplay goes beyond the thing extending the giver. Once thrown into gift exchange---once entered into the game of extension---the things given involve a mutual weighing down of the parties. The metaphor points to a crucial aspect of the picture: ideally, a gift exchange successfully carried out and maintained helps render the relationship between the two parties solid, unshakeable---object-like, subject-like, and, in Weiner's general sense, inalienable. Through the particular magic with things that we call the gift, such reciprocal exchange comes to stand for the relationship that is not fleeting, and in a sense helps constitute that relationship and

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build up its context. It facilitates an accumulation of "mutual indebtedness" (Gregory, 2015, p. 45), one that is open-ended for as long as the parties agree to its continuation. But it is emphatically not the kind of debt described by Graeber that can be precisely measured, enforced by law, or passed along to another party. Rather, it is embedded in the relationship itself and in the things and evaluations that help constitute it. In its closeness to the parties to the exchange, the relationship of mutual indebtedness runs up against the barrier of the partners' own lives. For once the partner is gone, the exchange (though not its effects) is gone, and, given some widespread but by no means universal suppositions about the living and the dead, the relationship as a malleable, quasi-agentive entity is gone.

We are already a ways away from Weiner's opposition of inalienability to reciprocity. Instead, in this reading of gift exchange, inalienability and reciprocity are entangled. But what, then, about Weiner's classic case of inalienable possessions, what Godelier refers to as sacred objects? We already have a hint of this in thinking through gift exchange. There, we followed the movement of the object from inalienable and alienated thing to its resting place in the possession of the exchange partner, where it normatively comes to be both inalienable and no longer subject to alienation. Formally speaking, such a thing and its accompanying comportments already start to look like Godelier's sacred object. But if ideally the thing received by partner 2 does not leave their hands, what happens to it? One can imagine all sorts of culturally specific possibilities. Perhaps the death of partner 1 frees it for further exchange, or for that matter the death of partner 2 does the same for their inheritors. But another possibility is that the strictures on exchange remain with the received thing even after partner 2's death. One solution is to simply bury the thing, or destroy it. But short of that, if the gift is not to leave the hands of the recipients, then the dilemma, and its potential solution, is passed along as well.

In fact, this is exactly how Godelier reads sacred objects: as "gifts that the gods or the spirits are supposed to have given to the ancestors of men, and that their present-day descendants must keep safely stored away and neither sell nor give" (2002, pp. 30-31). This treatment of sacred objects gives the lie to Godelier's (and Weiner's) occasionally overly strict contrast between exchange and keeping/transmission. If transmission is in fact a form of exchange, sacred objects enter us into new dimensions of time and

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collectivity. In classic gift exchange, it was possible to think in terms of two contemporaneous partners. Time was a component, but usually at most on the scale of a lifetime. By introducing gods, ancestors, and descendants, sacred objects introduce a different scale: we are talking "no longer of exchanges between the living, but between the living and their dead, and the living and their gods" (Godelier, 1999, p. 169). Keep in mind that generations are evident at the level of the family yet far less so at the level of wider society. On the wider societal scale, the concept of generations allows one to extend discontinuous categories familiar from the domain of kinship to non-kin; in other words, it allows one to conceptualize subjects that overlap and contrast with one another along a temporal scale, and that therefore might engage in exchange with one another. The object passed from generation to generation involves overlap, in that the generation that gives has direct contact with the generation that receives. Indeed, the passing along (especially when involving "immaterial" practices) might well happen within the lifetime of the giver. On the other hand, the recipient is meant to outlast the giver.

There are other interesting dimensions of temporality introduced here that bring us back to the question of context. It may be true that in Godelier's typology, the sacred object stays maximally embedded in its context in the present, and in the process also helps constitute that present context. But the object is often something understood as the remnant of some prior context that has otherwise dried up. It is a broken-off part of a puzzle.[10] So in this artifactual sense, much like Godelier's gift, the sacred object is in fact alienated, but with respect to its original context, whose marks it carries.

But that is not the end of the story, in that the initial decontextualization is followed by a fashioning of a context that can sustain that decontextualized thing. In a sense, the community of possessors or custodians is itself the new context. This swaddling of the object within a new context involves various kinds of material care, but also the layering on and attachment to the object of various intentions, attitudes, and stories. Often such stories narrate the object's origin, which can include the story of its transfer to the ancestors. So in narrative terms, the original context is important, but so are the circumstances of its transmission---a transmission that includes not only the material object itself but all those accoutrements that adhere to it. And while the initial transmission is often the focus of narrative, it is not the only transmission. Each transmission is important, and they are cumulative: they accumulate more and more

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history, more and more care, more and more investment across generations---in short, more value. But there is also accumulation in the sense that there is the feeling of the same thing happening across generations, a kind of projection of context into the future---that since the commitment was made long ago to treat the thing as a sacred object, there is essentially one thing that's been happening, which is a kind of custodianship.[11]

This is not to say that nothing changes. Weiner made a big deal about inalienable possessions being used to assert group difference, and thinking about generations allows us to develop this point in a different direction: even if each generation is equally adept at preserving the sacred object, each generation is different. There might even be a way in which keeping the thing the same facilitates such difference, in that it seems to say, "There is a 'we' here thanks to this thing; and thanks to it, that 'we' can change but still be the same."

So in many respects, the sacred object looks like a transgenerational loan or form of "savings" (Peebles, 2020), and maybe even like a stand-in for kinship itself, with the generation transmitting its own substance to the subsequent. There is a thing passed along that is understood to be marked out for conservation. It does not entirely belong to its recipient; rather, it points back to the previous generation, and before that the generation before that, and ultimately back to the gods who gave it. It is something that must be kept intact. And it must have its story and its status as sacred object attached to it, so that one might be able to keep track of it, and so that the story might have somewhere to live.[12] In fact, as in more classic gift exchange but more so, this story and status are a crucial part of what is transmitted. The transmitted object and its narrative envelope---both the paper and what is written on it, so to speak---propel a subject into the future by requiring a subject; the object in its fullest sense will not work without a subject who, interpellated, takes up its cause (Weiss, 1997, p. 167). And that object and its uptake also help form the subject. But thinking of it as a loan raises the question of some future moment of return. If it was lent to the ancestors by the gods, this raises the problem of how and when such an object would be returned. The gods might well always be with us, but what would returning the object look like? And if the object is somehow essential to a group, what does returning it mean for the group's subjecthood? The sacred object as loan thus introduces problems of eternity and end-time.

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Thinking about the sacred object instead in terms of gift exchange offers a slightly different picture that nevertheless brings out related dilemmas. In this interpretation, there is the initial link created by the giving of the object. There is not necessarily the dense give-and-take of classic gift exchange. In slowing down, the exchange is stylized, streamlined, and it walks us right to the lip of a lifetime (perhaps writ large, as in the generation), thereby upping the ante of the exchange and posing a massive problem regarding the return. If the giver is gone, what can one do? Is one entirely captured by the giver, with no possibility of redress? And in the first place, why give to someone who can't repay, and vice versa? Part of a possible answer brings us back to the differentiation between the object as object and the object as vehicle for memory: one might indeed be captured, but one can at least pay homage or engage in some other form of sacrifice in memory to the one who passed along the sacred object. But there is still the problem of what to do with the stubborn object itself that has broken through the generational barrier, entrapping the exchange partner. One option is to walk away, to refuse to engage in such a lopsided exchange, or to declare the obligation null and void, or to destroy the object. Another option, however, is to simply pass the object along to the next generation. It starts to look like one is turning the next generation into a stand-in for the previous one.[13] From a slightly different angle, it looks like one is getting rid of the thing in order, in generational terms, to keep it.[14]

This is not debt in the sense of exactitude, legal enforceability, transferability to distant parties, or, God forbid, conversion into some other form such as money. But it is more debt-like than in the classic gift exchange, in that there is more room for exactitude---the thing transmitted stays roughly the same. Plus, by definition, the transmission of the sacred object breaks out of the substantive relationship by breaking through the generational barrier. And much like anthropological theory in my gloomier moments, the passing along of the sacred object to the next generation can look like the passing along of a debt, a yoke, even a curse.

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Let's return to the dollar bill my grandfather's cousin Blanka gave me. Long conserved from diversion back into the usual stream, the dollar is now a broken-off part of an earlier context that it evokes. This earlier context was a situation, an event, an interaction, an exchange. The dollar carries a story about that earlier context with it, and

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vice versa. In conserving the dollar, I conserve the story, and in return, the story conserves the dollar bill.

The story is a representation of the earlier context; it is not the earlier context itself. At the same time, it is not not from that context. It derives from that context, is an abstraction from it, keeps something of it, no matter how much it transforms and has been transformed in the tellings. The story is what Karin Barber (2007) calls an oral text, one that was able to emerge from the earlier context and outlive it. The story, too, gets conserved, transmitted along with the dollar bill. So preserving the dollar means telling the story; telling the story means preserving the dollar.

I can't ignore that there is a certain resemblance between the storied dollar as the remaining piece of a puzzle---a remnant whose preservation involves the reconstitution and transformation and extension of the rest of the puzzle---and the question of kinship as it plays out here. My great-grandparents must have seen their niece and nephew as a remnant of a much larger family. The two of them were the broken-off pieces of a puzzle that had been abruptly destroyed. And the old context now irrecoverable, they were seeking to establish themselves in a new context. Of course, they themselves were not objects, but for their kin in New York, they stood for something precious---a relation, a richness in relatives---that was suddenly gone. Reaching out, the American branch sought to initiate a connection that might help to nurture the two siblings who remained, and in turn nurture the kinship connection. Which it did, and which continued through various kinds of contact and hospitality, all the way to today.

But why a dollar? Why was a letter not enough? It was a commodity---indeed, a token of the commodity of commodities---that was of course being diverted (Godelier might say moved backward; 1999, p. 165) into the realm of gift, and it must have already been intended to be exceptional in some way right from its initial sending. My great-grandparents must have known that a dollar or its equivalent in francs would not have bought much. Rather, they must have understood it as a vehicle for an intention that could not have been read by just any possessor of it, as if they had written on the dollar's face in invisible ink, legible only to relatives. I imagine it as a gesture of sincerity---a way of saying that this letter really is from America, that the relatives mean business, that they are ready to sacrifice on their kinsmen's behalf, that this is just the

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beginning, the number 1. In a way, it is a bet that subverts a symbol of market exchange to consecrate a decidedly non-market exchange and thereby renew a tie of kinship.

Sure enough, the bet paid off, in that it did initiate further exchanges, further kinshipping. And clearly the dollar bill came to mean enough to Blanka for her to save it from conversion back into something liquid, eventually preserving it behind plastic, with a red thread (like a Kabbalistic talisman) closing it at the top. She had come to understand it as having emerged from and remained tied to a story coeval with its tie to the givers and receivers and with their common ties to the previous givers of life. In giving care to the thing (a thing that invited as much from its first arrival), the thing has the potential to give back meaning. At the risk of seeing reciprocity everywhere, we can say there is reciprocity between receiving subject and subject-like object, precisely thanks to the fact that the subject-like object had been in a reciprocal exchange with the sending subject. And thereby that object comes to be the vehicle for the connection of subject to subject, adding up to the magical but ephemeral subject called "family."

This is a very small thing and array of people, much smaller than in the usual discussions of inalienable possessions in the literature. And if it is a sacred object, it is one that originated not in gods (even if it reads "In God We Trust") but in ancestors. But once treated as an object that should not be relinquished, it raises the question of what to do with it. In this instance, Blanka---childless, and rather distant from her relatives in France---saw fit to pass it along to me, the grandson of one of those American cousins. Surely Blanka was not giving me the dollar so that I might buy a lollipop back home. Instead, she was giving it to me as a stab at continuity, as a wager to extend the story, to extend the context called kinship, as a way of upholding kinship as an inalienable value---this particular kinship, her kinship, the nearly erased kinship that made this thing and that this thing might make and extend. She was weaving the commonality of kinship by passing the object, like a needle, through generational difference, with all its geographic and personal inflections. She was giving it to me as a way of giving me the story lodged in it, for which it was a vehicle and that served in turn as a vehicle for making sense of and maintaining this object. And even beyond the story of its origins, it is ever more fragile (despite its plastic covering), thanks to the

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demands of exogamy and the passage of time, as the fuzzy-edged cloud called the bilateral kindred expands and metamorphizes and dissipates.

And along with the story that she passed along, Blanka passed along a dilemma. For I have no doubt that she also gave me the dollar as a way to get rid of the thing, to divest herself of a charged possession. Now I am stuck with it. Which, having outlived the first sender and the first receiver, foists the problem on me. I could saddle it in turn on someone else, perhaps one of my own children or, more fittingly given the transcontinental gestures, back to a member of the younger generation in France, should I enjoy such a relationship with one of them in the future. It is too small and idiosyncratic to hand off to a museum. And anyway, it only really makes sense from inside this particular kinship field: it is meaningful and transmissible only if you have an idea of the original protagonists, a sense of a link to them and their context in the first place (from whence a portion of its pathos: this will inevitably die out, and soon; here, the ancestors don't reclaim anything, they just fade).

Or I could risk the knotted red thread and spend it, or sell it (silver certificates, I read, can fetch up to 20 dollars depending on their condition). This would hasten the whole chain of relationship to its close, and therefore would be a refusal to take up the thing as a sacred object and, by extension, to hold sacred the kin commitment, past and future. Or, in a more pious mood, I might use my earnings to do a good deed.

Or, less prescriptively, I could lose track of it, forget about it. Found among my belongings, it could state its unusualness through its own person---the plastic, the red thread, and examined closely enough, its age. But unmoored from the story, it would at best be an enigmatic talisman.

Or I could write an essay about it.

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# Footnotes

**1 :** For a related point about primordial debt theory as "the ultimate nationalist myth," see Graeber, 2011, 70.↩

**2 :** Friedman makes this point in his review of Weiner (1995, pp. 121-122). But for a provocative reading of Weiner that treats the "hoard" (inalienable possessions) and "savings" (that which is lent out or circulated) as "an intertwined dialectical whole," see Peebles, 2020.↩

**3 :** In fact, Graeber (2001, p. 183) tends to read Weiner as attempting to salvage a key aspect of Mauss (the entanglement of the gifted object with its original owner). As will be seen, he is right that her argument tends in this direction, but at least on its surface, it is a challenge to Mauss.↩

**4 :** See also Thomas, 1991, p. 24.↩

**5 :** Note that this reading is at cross-purposes from Peebles' treatment of the hoard as liquid, versus savings as illiquid (2020).↩

**6 :** For a reading that combines aggression and sacrifice, see Anspach, 2017, p. 10.↩

**7 :** Marcel Hénaff (2010, p. 71) describes it as a form of "reciprocal recognition...a gesture that is found in no other living beings in that it is mediated by a thing, but a thing that comes from oneself, stands for oneself, and bears witness to the commitment that was made." But note the controlled aspect of this, which Hénaff calls "controlled conflict" (79). For a reading of the thing as something interposed in order to tame promiscuous reciprocity, see Anspach, 2017, pp. 4, 10.↩

**8 :** In this sense, Graeber's claim that partners in gift exchange are more constrained than they say misses the next level down: they are in fact quite autonomous in that ideally, each of them has the power to end the series of exchanges and thereby bring the relationship to an end.↩

**9 :** For a clarification of the textual chain from Ranapiri to his later interpreters and translators, see Hēnare, 2018.↩

**10 :** See Graeber on kula (2001, p. 166), as well as Peebles on the chit (2020).↩

**11 :** Although the Islamic institution of waqf has some important differences from the kind of inalienable objects I have in mind here, this is one of many points of overlap. On waqf as inalienability, see Glasser, 2020, and Moumtaz, 2023. For a fuller account of waqf in the modern Lebanese context, see Moumtaz, 2021.↩

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**12 :** On the oral text that resides in an object, see Barber, 2007, p. 76. Note that this means that all "material" patrimony includes an "immaterial" aspect, and that "immaterial" patrimony is always made up of multiple "immaterialities" that include the spoken intention surrounding the object.↩

**13 :** There is an intriguing resemblance here to Nicholas Allen's tetradic model of kinship (2011). Again, read as kinship, the dilemma of inalienable possessions can be understood as a dilemma about reproduction.↩

**14 :** I thank Brad Weiss for pointing out this way of putting it. Note that Graeber might be right that such a kept object "makes reciprocity impossible," but only with regard to outsiders who are temporally co-present. Once we make room for generations, such an object is all about reciprocity; in fact, intergenerational reciprocity is here the other side of non-reciprocity with one's co-temporal others---a point that in fact blends into Graeber's point about the intergenerational construction of inequality (2001, p. 211).↩

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