To the memory of Annette Weiner,
an inspiring friend and colleague

The Empire of Things

Regimes of Value and Material Culture

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abstraction and fluidity of money even in full-fledged market economies.

11. The author happens to be from the neighboring island of Flores, but the ideas she expresses are being propagated in churches and Christian schools across Sumba as well.

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Alienable Gifts and Inalienable Commodities

Daniel Miller

My central contention in this chapter is that in generalizing from an ethnography of shopping in North London, one can discern a basic dichotomy between two spheres of exchange involving gifts and commodities, respectively. The first of these spheres is based on an explicit classification and representation of social relationships in terms of money.[1] It allows people to develop highly rationalist and instrumental perspectives based on explicit calculation, perspectives that are employed in the process of selection. This sphere is gift exchange. It exists in opposition to the second form of exchange, which is based on the use of commodities that are not translated into gifts. In this sphere, which I call "provisioning," the primary agenda appears to call for either the creation or the acknowledgment of a transcendent goal in life that might well be termed the spirit of the inalienable. There are many elements within commodity exchange that seem to negate the elements of calculation, individualism, monetarization, and explicit rationalism that are most characteristic of the gift.

This conclusion is intended at one level to amuse, in that it systematically reverses what have come to be conventional ways of talking

about the gift-commodity dualism. But beyond the initial moment of fun is a more serious aim, that of going beyond what has sometimes been a stultifying classification. My second concern in this chapter, then, is to address one paradoxical (and therefore perhaps also amusing) implication of this initial argument, which is that in North London, the equivalent of what Weiner (1992) has termed inalienable possessions is the commodity.

I imagine it would be generally agreed that one of the highlights of anthropological discussion in the last two decades has been what might be called Maussian revisionism—that is, work inspired by Mauss's book *The Gift* (1990 [1925]), but almost always developed as a creative critique of Mauss. Not all of this has come from within anthropology; there is an equally important component within French philosophy. One of the most influential uses of Mauss's work came in Bataille's attempt (1988b) to create a political economy of consumption, and more recently, Derrida (1992) offered an influential reading of *The Gift*. Within social anthropology, contributions have ranged from the more formal exposition of gift-commodity dualism by Gregory (1982; in 1997 he described the relationship between gift and commodity as "coeval") to continued exhortations toward the creative application of Mauss (e.g., Carrier 1995) and a sustained debate within Melanesian anthropology by Strathern (1988), Thomas (1991), Weiner (1992), Godelier (1999), and many others. Schrift (1997) provided a valuable guide to the extension of this debate beyond anthropology.

The most conspicuous trajectory through Maussian revisionism has been the critique of the basic duality of gift and commodity, in which highlights have included criticisms by Lévi-Strauss (1987), Sahlins (1972: ch. 4), and, perhaps most significantly, Bourdieu (1984:3–8). These were followed by a highly influential critique from Appadurai (1986), since which the dualistic element has certainly been in retreat. The direct inspiration for this chapter, however, came from my reading of Gell's (1992) argument that the gift was a secondary development of commodity-like barter in traditional Melanesia. Given the weight of academic investment in the opposite conceptualization of gifts and commodities, this seemed both an elegant closure to the debate and extremely funny. On reflection, however, there seemed to be room for at least one more contribution that could follow Gell's paper. It would

undertake the same inversion of the conventional terms, but with respect to a context more akin to the France with which Mauss was ultimately concerned than to the Pacific. This is the ambition behind the present essay.

In starting to switch the terms "gift" and "commodity," I am clearly aided by the emphasis that followed Bourdieu (1977) on the roles of strategy and sometimes calculation in Pacific exchange. My clearest precedent is the contribution of Appadurai (1986), which has often been bracketed with that of Kopytoff (1986) in that their work attempted to create, for the Western commodity, a more flexible sense of the relationship between alienability and the inalienable. Since my intentions are directed toward this debate rather than toward the explication of ethnography per se, I do not try to describe in this chapter the considerable variation and complexity of exchange and consumption practices that I observed during fieldwork. The evidence about to be presented is structured by a highly normative dichotomy that demonstrates the consequences of applying the terms of this long-standing anthropological discourse to this particular ethnographic circumstance. I do not, therefore, follow Thomas (1992), who demonstrated the constraints of dualistic paradigms when applied to exchange in the Pacific and revealed a much wider range of exchange forms there.

The tradition I want to criticize is that which has tended to assume that when making comparisons between the Occident and the Pacific, the duality of gift and commodity can be retained as a basic opposition in which the term "gift" evokes a sense of the inalienable while "commodity" is taken as the essence of the alienable. The Pacific literature reinforces this opposition by continually returning to the idea of the "spirit of the gift" as something that in some sense prevents the development of commoditization. The result is evident in most of the work on gift giving in the United States by anthropologists and sociologists such as Caplow (1984) and Cheal (1988). For them, the gift is primarily an element within the domestic arena, where it assists the domestic in becoming a reservoir of affective relations within a market economy. The gift is understood as a small still remnant of socially embedded exchange within the swirling tide of alienable commodities that surround us. I, too, have worked within this tradition, as in my discussion

of Christmas as the festival of the gift that in some ways tames the relentless shift to commoditization (Miller 1993).

WEINER: IT'S LOVE THAT STOPS THE WORLD GOING ROUND

Weiner's (1992) account of inalienable objects is an important stepping stone within my argument, because she clearly opposed what had become an extension of Mauss's work into a more general emphasis on reciprocity.[2] This had come about through the writings of Lévi-Strauss and others who threatened to turn reciprocity into some kind of general principle constitutive of society. In effect, her work was pitched against attempts to reduce all exchange to basic principles of equivalence.

Instead, Weiner emphasized the significance of a range of objects that are not usually entered into the practice of reciprocal exchange. Such objects are often the most powerful symbols of the group concerned and of its constancy and stability. It is the potential of these objects for negating exchange that turns them into sites for the objectification of transcendence. Weiner did not abstract the emotional context as an affective dimension, but there are many instances in the accounts she gives from various ethnographies where affectivity in the form of passion is at least implied, whether in Maori fighting over *taonga* or Pintupi devotion to original *tjurunga* (Weiner 1992:61, 108). What emerges clearly is that it is exchange, not love, that "makes the world go round." Love (or, to keep the terms in their appropriate context, obligatory devotion), by contrast, tends to act as the very negation of this sense of movement by confirming a stable and constant center to society's affective identity.

Weiner's other focus was on the role of women in many societies as the key devotees who maintain the power of the inalienable by standing for what cannot be reduced to exchange. Her emphasis was on images of the female that refuse sexuality as an object of exchange or reciprocity. A core example is woman as sibling rather than woman as wife, which raises the problematic status of love as passionate devotion when applied within the sibling relation (Weiner 1992:76–77). The implication is that the love for which women are responsible—both as devotees and as objects of devotion—is at the core of the devotional concern

that constitutes the inalienable possession. My argument depends on the idea that in North London there is an equivalent ideal of women as associated with the practice of devotion and especially with love. Women, therefore, seek to retain objects of devotion that become symbols of all that transcends mere equivalence or reciprocity. To a degree, then, disregard for women's love or for the female as the objectification of the potentiality of love is disregard for her core relationship to the production and reproduction of that which is regarded as inalienable. I follow Strathern (1988) in understanding this ideology, which associates women with love, as the larger discourse that creates gender as difference, rather than understanding it merely as the elucidation of what a pregiven category we term "women" happens to do.

For my argument to work, however, there is a clear paradox. The central point of Weiner's book is that all this is achieved through the mediation of a genre of material culture termed "inalienable possessions." In my argument, another genre of material culture, the commodity—that most alienable of objects—plays the equivalent role. By implication, this poses a problem in terms of what women come to represent in the transition to a capitalist society (for which see Johnson 1998). Weiner helps me along by problematizing the more common assumption that we should be looking to the gift as our key emblem of the inalienable, because she treats the gift as the instrument of equivalence as much as the spirit of the inalienable. But this is still a long way from substituting the commodity within the same slot.

In North London it would be hard to evoke a deep mystical sense of the gift equivalent to the *hau* analyzed by Mauss, or even to privilege some ontological site for the inalienable in the philosophical tradition of Locke and Marx. From the ethnographic perspective, the inalienable can be said to exist only inasmuch as a given cultural tradition constructs relationships of material culture in that way. As I have argued elsewhere (Miller 1987), inalienability comes mainly through the consumption of commodities and the power of consumption to extract items from the market and make them social or personal. This is because it is the person who lies at the core of any local conceptualization of the inalienable. The vanguard of discussion has become a concern with topics such as the new reproductive technologies or organ transplants, where the core principles of the inalienable as a property of personhood come under threat

(e.g., Edwards et al. 1993; Strathern 1996). In North London, then, inalienability is a rather fragile property of objects that comes to them from their attachment to groups or persons.

THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF GIFT GIVING

The ethnography from which the following material is taken was conducted during one year (1994–95) and consisted of a study of shopping on and around a street in North London. In part I was accompanied by Alison Clarke, who studied non-shopping elements of provisioning and is presently writing up further fieldwork on the same street.[3] The study comprised greater or lesser exposure to 76 households, of which 52 are in what I call Jay Road. Jay Road consists of council (state) housing on one side and a variety of housing types, ranging from small purpose-built maisonettes to large family houses, on the other.[4] In order to include a larger selection of middle-class households in our fieldwork, we expanded to households on streets that were almost all adjacent to Jay Road. For the sake of simplicity, I have amalgamated these in this account and refer solely to "the street."[5]

Rose is a working-class retired woman living in the council estate on Jay Road. She has been invited to the wedding of a friend who comes from a wealthier, middle-class milieu. Rose has a strong sense of what is appropriate in gift buying, an activity to which she devotes a considerable amount of her time. In this case she is more than usually anxious about what would be appropriate. She has therefore consulted some friends about what they feel is currently the "going rate" for gifts at the wedding of a friend, and they come to a firm conclusion that the answer is £20.

Following a common practice, the couple have established a wedding list. Rose does not much approve of this restraint on her selection, but real consternation follows when she inspects the prices of items on the list. Clearly, unlike the younger, middle-class couple, she is embarrassed at the idea of giving a single bedsheet as a present and astonished at the cost of the listed set of bone china, which would reduce her to giving a single cup and saucer. In the event, she selects a beach towel—one of only two individual items she can afford. It costs £15. She therefore decides to add an additional voucher from this same shop for £5 to make up the £20 total she believes appropriate for this gift. The

resulting dual gift may perplex the recipients, but it conforms to Rose's own firm belief that she must end up with a gift of the precise monetary value appropriate to the occasion.

In this case, the purchase is complicated by the crossing over of class cultures, which is perhaps the most common cause of confusion in British exchange relations. But otherwise it echoes a characteristic element in gift purchasing. The buyer of the gift expects first to establish the precise monetary value appropriate to the relationship being expressed in the gift and its occasion. Where there is doubt, phone calls to friends and relatives allow some discussion about the current going rate. This enables a clear categorization of relationships. The going rate may be for a sibling at Christmas or a child's best friend's birthday. Even for the closest relationships, few people showed any difficulty with the idea of a going rate that was expressed as a sum of money.

One of the most prevalent forms of gift shopping on the street arose from the requirement that children take gifts to birthday parties. For several years during primary school, it is common to invite all or most of a child's class to a party. This results in a child's attending 20 or more parties a year. There was considerable discussion about the going rate for an appropriate gift. Largely this rate was seen as relative to a particular school; for example, one school was criticized as a place where parents spent too much on such gifts. Within this idea of a going rate, there was room for marking stronger relationships of friendship, either between the children or between the parents concerned, by buying gifts of a higher value or buying an especially appropriate gift. I also saw parents buy gifts of a lower value in order actively to discourage a relationship between their child and another. The idea of a going rate also enabled parents to make explicit certain strategies such as competitive giving. A device for spending less money than the going rate was to buy gifts abroad, so that people would not know how much the items cost, or at sales.

The alienability of money became itself an important element in gift giving. For example, one mother with somewhat older secondary school children had been arguing with them about the presents to be given to their friends for their birthdays. She had already discussed the issue with the mother of one child, who had indicated her desire for some sports equipment. Her son, however, intervened and insisted that

she should give money as a present. It appeared that the two children had agreed to pressure their respective parents to give money rather than a gift, thus allowing the children to control the purchasing of their respective presents. The parents had wanted to avoid this partly because there was a disparity in income between the two households, and present buying could give the appearance of equivalence where it was not the case. Giving money meant that there had to be exact symmetry between the two.

Money had come to play an increasing role as the substance of gift giving for people on the street. In part this was a measure of the desire for autonomy by the recipients of gifts, as was clear in the case just described. Equally important was the feeling that since a "going rate" was becoming ever more explicit as the criterion by which presents were decided, one might just as well make this clear in the present itself. This logic could be true not only of relatively distant relationships, such as those manifested at weddings, bar mitzvahs, and similar life-cycle events, but also of gift giving between parents and children. There were still areas, however, where giving money was considered inappropriate; it was rare, for example, between partners. Furthermore, the ambiguity between money and gift was exploited by the ever-expanding range of gift vouchers and gift tokens that were available for providing money with the gloss of more traditional gift giving.

In several cases where the buying of Christmas presents for children was discussed, it was clear that a compromise was being established both in the problematic issue of allowing some autonomy to the children and in agreeing on the appropriate sum to be spent. This compromise was made through the use of a shop catalog called *Argos* (for details, see Clarke 1998). Most families possessed a copy of this catalog, which offered a wide range of standard toys and other items of interest to children. The *Argos* catalog emerged as the key means by which selection of items could be discussed at home, thus enabling people to avoid the experience of actually shopping with children, something disliked by most parents and most children as well. In the case of Christmas and birthday gifts, it also allowed a negotiation to develop in which parents indicated the appropriate price parameters and children indicated their preferences for a range of goods from which the parents could then select the actual "surprise" gifts for their children.

It appears, then, from observation of a wide range of gift giving, that it has emerged as one of the few arenas in which a relatively precise assessment of a social relationship, between either kin or non-kin, is made and translated into a price. As at least one stage in gift buying, the notion of the "appropriate" is assessed as an abstract idea of equivalence, which helps classify the relationship in strict monetary terms. What happens once this decision is reached depends upon the nature of the relationship. When the recipient is either little known or relatively distant, it is the abstract amount to be spent that remains dominant—that is, many items will serve as long as they cost the correct amount. When a close relationship or one with much affection is involved, a secondary stage takes over in which the concern becomes choosing an item that reflects the degree of fondness the giver has for the recipient.

In this secondary stage, the giver assesses how a whole range of aspects of the relationship might be expressed in this particular present. Many strategies are made possible by deviating from the going rate or by translating the sum of money into a certain gift, as well as by the way it is wrapped up and presented. The desire to fix the appropriate sum in no way lessens the giver's subsequent anxiety about how the gift itself will be read as an explicit statement about the relationship between giver and receiver.

Let me give an example of this sort of tension. Fiona went on a shopping expedition to Brent Cross Shopping Mall on 15 December. A middle-class woman with an academic background and a comfortable income, she normally would have been relatively relaxed about the selection of goods. This shopping trip, however, stood in marked contrast to other occasions when I accompanied her, in that this was the only time she came armed with a written list not only of what she wanted to buy each person but of where she should buy it and how much it should cost. She had decided on an overall cost for the typical Christmas gift (£15) and was concerned that individual unplanned decisions would lead her to more expensive alternatives.

The reason she had spent so much time and consideration on each purchase, even before she started shopping, was not, however, just to keep gifts to a desired cost. It was also because of her feeling that each gift was a clear indicator of a number of elements in her relationship

with its recipient. The amount spent was one of several factors that made a gift more or less appropriate. A revealing conversation concerned the gift she would buy for her child minder. (A child minder is a woman, usually working class, with her own family, who looks after the child of another, often middle-class family for part of the week—for example, after school hours or when the latter parent works part-time.) Fiona noted that the previous Christmas she had deliberately bought the child of her child minder a rather more physical and playful toy than she would have bought for her own children, for whom she tended to buy gifts of clear educational value. Her assumption, following the lines of Bourdieu's (1984) argument in *Distinction* (which she might well have read), was that the appropriate gift for a working-class woman was a toy that had a high quotient of fun as against education. This had been a failure, since the child minder had clearly been disappointed in the present, and Fiona interpreted this as meaning that although the child minder did indeed tend to buy fun toys for her children, she had expected that Fiona would help balance this with an educational toy reflecting the background of the giver rather than the receiver. This Christmas, therefore, Fiona intended to buy a toy more akin to those she would buy her own children. This reasoning about the relationship was clear, explicit, and easily communicable to me.

Similarly, in a discussion I had with Fiona about books she was purchasing for some of her relatives, it again became clear how the gift was an assessment of neither the giver nor the receiver but of the relationship between them. This assessment might include an affective element when the relationship was based on love or deep friendship, which should be made evident in "the thought that has gone into" the selection—though even here this element came second to a decision about the appropriate amount to spend. On the same trip Fiona was also buying a gift for the next meeting of her National Childbirth Trust group of mothers and children. In that case her emphasis in discussion with me was on how important it was not to buy anything too expensive, since the gift needed to be on a par with the kinds of presents bought by the other mothers, some of whom were less well off than she.

In many ways the logics of gift giving are among the most overt and explicit of all those involved in purchasing. It is far easier to discuss gift purchasing than ordinary provisioning. It is a common topic of discus-

sion, in which people feel relatively free and clear about the rationalization and processes of consideration that lead to a particular purchase. None of this is in any way incompatible with the points made by Mauss with respect to either reciprocity or the position of reciprocity in constituting the relationship. Nor is it incompatible with descriptions of gift giving in the Pacific in which the elements of calculation and strategy are stressed, as by Bourdieu. But in the North London case it is clear that calculation, strategy, and abstraction do not represent some secondary "weakening" of the socially constituted element of this building of relationships but together are the primary mode by which it is achieved. It is also clear that gift giving in the West is not a form of totalization as in the Maussian sense of prestation. On the contrary, it is a limited and "framed" dyadic exchange that classifies the relationship in that most alienable of media—money—in some cases prior to expressing the individuality of the relationship in the precise form of the object given.[6] Ironically, considering the tensions evident in the spread of money and the perceived threat to pregiven formal exchange systems (see Keane, this volume), in North London gift giving has become the main refuge of formal exchange.

PROVISIONING AND LOVE

The significance of the explicit abstraction represented by monetary evaluation that forms the first stage of gift giving becomes evident when it is contrasted with the bulk of mundane shopping for commodities, which I call provisioning. Provisioning is most often carried out by a female who is responsible for grocery shopping and for buying clothes for herself, any children in the household, and often also for a male partner. She also tends to dominate the purchase of general household materials and furnishings, although she is usually accompanied by a partner during the purchase of the latter.

Details of provisioning on Jay Street can be found in Miller 1998 and are not repeated here. In general they accord closely with those observed in a wide range of studies conducted by feminist researchers whose primary concern has been to foreground the work of the housewife as unvalorized labor (many examples are found in Jackson and Moores 1995). A finding common to all these studies is that the housewife sees herself as serving a more general set of needs and concerns to

which she subordinates her own sense of desire. Typically, the one time a meal either is not prepared or is prepared with minimal effort is when she has only herself to feed. The main concern of these researchers has been to analyze the degree of effort involved in housewifery and to uncover the ideology that sustains the inequalities. DeVault (1991) has been particularly helpful in this regard because she includes all the intellectual work of planning, considering, and becoming anxious about provisioning as well as the labor required. By contrast, in almost all such studies informants are shown to refuse this perspective on their work. They maintain that as housewives, they represent a special, largely female contribution in which work should not be reduced to mere questions of equivalence and effort but rather should be respected as a manifestation of love, care, and devotion, which are in some sense "higher" ideals. There is, then, a direct conflict between the housewife's ideological premise and that of the researcher. Both my work and DeVault's suggest that feminism has had much less impact than might have been expected on who actually does what in the home.

In Miller 1998 I detailed four elements of shopping to demonstrate how, in practice, it is used to create and sustain the higher ideals to which many housewives consider themselves devoted. These four elements are thrift, the "treat," love, and the discourse of shopping. Provisioning is an activity in which concerns over money are generally at the fore, but in a manner quite distinct from the way they operate in gift purchasing. The central concern of provisioning is thrift. The primary ritual of shopping is a performance that begins with a discourse of spending money and often a vision of excessive expenditure but then transforms this into an experience of saving money and an emphasis on money as a substance primarily stored and retained rather than expended. In my 1998 book I rejected suggestions that this ritual was distinctly different from traditions of either peasant thrift (Gudeman and Rivera 1990) or bourgeois thrift (Vickery 1993).[7] I also described the vast number of ways in which modern supermarket technologies facilitate shopping in enacting this transformation. New retail technologies allow almost any individual purchase to be conceptualized as an act of saving money without the shopper's having to be involved in a detailed consideration of price. Indeed, housewives engaged in provisioning, unlike in gift purchasing, proved to be largely

ignorant about actual prices and to have little knowledge of how much they were spending. What seemed to matter was that they could experience the individual purchase and the shopping expedition overall as an activity in which they had striven for and succeeded in saving money.

When I considered the beneficiaries of this thrift, I found it to be a core means by which the shopper objectifies an ideal higher or larger than herself, even though thrift does not involve the more concrete categorization of the house found in some studies (Gudeman and Rivera 1990). In effect, provisioning negates a vision of hedonistic materialism that dominates the discourse of shopping and transforms shopping into a practice that creates and sustains core values. This conclusion is strengthened by a study of the concept of the "treat." The treat is a common element in many shopping expeditions and consists of an extra item, often embodying some sense of extravagance or hedonism, that is purchased for a specific person. The shopper often gives it to herself as a reward for the labor involved in shopping, but she might also give treats to children or other members of the household. This genre of individualized purchase in effect helps render the bulk of provisioning a generalized purchase of goods that are neither individualized nor hedonistic. In short, the limited and framed treat helps define the rest of shopping as something other than merely treating.

In my 1998 book, I subjected provisioning to a larger argument based on studies of traditional sacrifice and especially a modified version of the structure of sacrifice as outlined by Hubert and Mauss (1964).[8] I suggested that an initial act of transgressive violence that dominates the discourse of sacrifice/shopping is transformed in sacrifice/shopping into a central means for creating and sustaining objects of devotion, be these deities or transcendent images of society. In effect, the act of consumption—which is also an act of using up or relinquishing resources—is, in Western society (and in most other societies), initially viewed as a destructive if not evil activity. Through the rituals of provisioning, shopping is redirected such that its essence is first used as obeisance to higher ideals. The remainder of the sacrifice/shopping is then passed back to the population in the form of an act of consumption—for example, a sacrificial/family meal—which is used to reconstitute the dominant social relationships, such as hierarchy or equivalence, among the consuming group.

In effect, then, the ideology of "care" or "love" (like the sacrificial offering [Valeri 1985:71–72]) becomes split into two elements, one of which is directed toward a transcendent ideal and the other toward a specific object of love. In Miller 1998, I also examined the changing forms by which this love or devotion has been objectified. I started with a consideration of devotion to deities in sacrifice and then considered the kinds of inalienable representations of society analyzed by Weiner (1992). From there I turned to the coincidence of the Enlightenment and the Romantic movement, which between them may be regarded as having shifted the object of devotion from religious ideals to an objectification in romantic partners. More recently, feminism has in turn removed the partner from such a pedestal, but ethnography shows a simultaneous rise of a cult of the infant in which, for example, feminist mothers negate their own projects of autonomy in obsessive self-elimination on behalf of infants. This has also been the subject of a separate study (see Miller 1997b).

This conclusion pitches two of the works of Mauss against each other. Although in *The Gift* Mauss established the idea of an inalienable spirit that was the very essence of the gift, this gave rise to a model of exchange as reciprocity and thereby, in turn, to a long-standing anthropological concern with commensurability and equivalence. It is the striving for equivalence that tends to end with the increasing alienability of things as commodities. By contrast, in many ways it is the work of Hubert and Mauss on sacrifice that has been more successful in sustaining a sense of the inalienable, because in that work they demonstrated that the primary concern of sacrifice is to establish a relationship based on difference or nonequivalence between the human and the divine.

This contrast suits exchange in North London. Whereas I have suggested that the gift cannot be regarded as an act of totalization, provisioning is central to any project of totalization in that it creates, through the domestic arena, the fundamental microcosm of all that most people in the study area understand as value. This distinction lies between the first stage of gift giving and the first stage of provisioning, and it takes the form of a search for thrift in the latter. In their secondary stages, however, gift giving and provisioning come together. Once the abstract notion of the "appropriate" sum is achieved for gift

giving, and once provisioning has performed its primary ritual of transforming expenditure into saving, then there may emerge a secondary element that in both cases is about demonstrating one's concern for an individual relationship through the careful choice of a specific commodity. It is to this secondary element of creating the particularity of households, individuals, and, especially, relationships that I now turn. This involves a consideration of the second paradox of this chapter, which is the contention that it is the very alienability and diversity of the commodity that allows it to play a role equivalent to that of the inalienable possession as portrayed by Weiner.

THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF LOVE

Sasha was born in South America, as was her husband, but she has lived in London for 13 years, and although the two talk of returning, there seems no immediate likelihood of their doing so. They have children aged nine and three and live on the council estate. The longest debate held during Sasha's shopping trips was about the color of a new set of toilet and bathroom mats. She was unsure whether to buy two different sets to match the colors of each bathroom or to buy two identical sets that matched each other and might work better if they moved house. Although I certainly found shoppers who both enjoyed and cultivated decisions of taste as matters of personal and individual skill, Sasha neither particularly enjoyed nor identified with this activity. Rather, she saw it as an onerous but natural part of her role in creating a home for her family, a home that was pleasant for them and of which they need not feel ashamed when visitors come to the flat. Much of her purchasing was of items such as toilet rolls, milk, and washing powder that form part of the same sense of mundane provisioning of the home.

Other aspects of her shopping were directed toward individuals, but her decision making was still premised on the individual's being socially contextualized in complex ways. In the case of the younger daughter, who needed a dress for her birthday, Sasha noted that out of the available selection, her husband would have preferred the plain black dress and she would have liked the blue dress with flowers, but her daughter was allowed to insist on a shiny maroon dress with ribbons and lace. The children were also allowed to choose in grocery shopping—for example, the flavors of items. But these choices all lay within

clear boundaries demarcating what would be acceptable to the wider world and just about bearable to the parents. Sasha was clearly disappointed that her daughter chose a brand-name fancy ice-cake for her birthday and refused the offer of a homemade cake on which her mother would have liked to have spent much time and attention, but the daughter's preference was respected. On many other occasions, such as when Sasha felt the family should have healthier food than they would have chosen for themselves or that they should have some South American foods to remind them of their origins, the daughters' and husband's choices were overturned, and Sasha followed her own feelings about what was appropriate. On the other hand, Sasha insisted the girls buy Easter eggs, even though this tradition did not exist in her homeland, because she felt that they should know about customs in the land where they lived. On occasion she and the daughters united to defy conventions. For example, the nine-year-old had reached an age for which the high-street shops no longer stocked a range of dresses suitable for younger girls but instead a kind of clothing that emulated more street-wise teenage fashions. But Sasha's daughter, who was generally quiet and studious, did not like such clothing, and her mother assisted her by going to a large number of shops in order to find an appropriate dress.

There are no rules to this decision making. The choices reflect a series of relationships between individuals and among members of the household as a whole, and they are made on the basis of varying interpretations of what is appropriate or socially conventional, as well as what is morally preferable. One cannot say that Sasha prefers South American foods in general, because what happens is that she decides she wants such items mainly when she feels she has ignored this factor for too long. Equally, a child's preference might be allowed simply because the parent has had to refuse so many more important matters, and it seems right to give the child a "turn."

Already in what is quite a simple case, it is clear that the shopper uses goods to express many contradictions in the nature of her relationships. One such contradiction is between the desire to educate her family to better or healthier choices as against the desire to respect their autonomy. But family relationships are far more complex than this. In most cases they are built from years in which a variety of emo-

tions have undergone sedimentation—in memory, expectation, guilt, and aspiration. Any good work of fiction can spend a hundred pages examining the nuances and contradictions in a simple family relationship (the Anne Tyler style of novel comes to mind). It is the relationship that is constantly searching for modes of expression. So the idea that a shopper expresses love or devotion in making choices must evoke the whole sphere of literature directed toward an exploration of the complexity of love in relationships. In contemporary shopping, the prime example of this material expression of the complexity of love has increasingly become that of parents shopping for their children.

This consideration of literature and shopping requires a change in our perception of material culture. Earlier novelists such as Balzac tended to spend considerable effort in describing characters through an analysis of their possessions—for example, the furnishings of their homes. This device was effective, but it was based on the individual as a relatively static, established personality, with an emphasis upon status or position in life, background origins, and sometimes suggestions of future aspiration. Material culture in such literature was being considered within a form of portraiture as a background "still life."[9] The genre known as the modern "shopping" novel, although supposedly trendy and new, is in a sense quite conservative. Such novels emphasize designer goods and name dropping, with the same sort of emphasis upon the individual and status. But the material culture of most shopping is based on far more complex structures of change, stability, and daily shifting nuances of relationships. It is closer to that of hunter-gatherer societies in which people are reported to have moved each day, in part so that they could shift the position of their hut to reflect the current state of their relationship to particular kin.

Douglas and Isherwood (1979:ix–xii) noted the relationship of consumption to both social relations and the work of the novelist (in their case Henry James) in depicting those relations, but their concern was with the classification of social relations, which I see as more the role of the gift. Such classification is very different from the daily dynamics through which such relations are objectified. A similar point applies to Bourdieu's (1984) use of "taste" to study class as a system of categories (see also Sahlins 1976). Provisioning is not a process of representation or semiotics. Although I have used the term love, it is only

in certain cases that this is the explicit legitimation of a relationship that is thereby being expressed. Provisioning is a continual practice that objectifies relationships both real and imagined, in the sense that they are in some measure the creations of that practice. The same practice subjectifies, in the sense that it creates persons as sources of desire. This is why the process may continue regardless of the evidence that it is commonly unvalorized by the people it is supposed to serve and fails in any instrumental criterion of actually improving these relationships. Provisioning may construct an ideal subject of its own, a subject created by the shopper notwithstanding the failure of any actual person to live up to the ideal. This is also why I found shopping for the household to be just as important in single-person households and in social units that bore little relation to any normative ideal of the household. North London is an area where gender and other roles have changed dramatically in certain respects (compare Beck and Gernsheim-Beck 1995 for Germany).

We can now start to resolve the paradox established through the consideration of Weiner's work. In it, devotion is directed toward and thus objectified in inalienable objects, through which people gain their social or cosmological identity and for which they might fight and die. In North London, it is persons who tend to be the objectification of the inalienable. As Kopytoff's work (1986) and my own (Miller 1987) have suggested, the degree of inalienability of an object results from the object's becoming part of personification or socialization through the act of consumption. Provisioning is directed by love through attempts to recognize as many nuances and subtleties of the relationship as possible. It is the attention to detail that is held to demonstrate the shopper's degree of concern. The key skill of the shopper as parent or partner is sensitivity and a seeming knowledge of what is wanted before the subject realizes he or she even had such a desire. Shopping as an act of subjectification that constructs others as the sources of desire therefore becomes the effort expended in all those complex considerations by which individuals and relationships are constantly reconsidered and reevaluated. This is by no means passive, since as both parents and partners, shoppers are likely to wish to mold, educate, and morally improve the persons for whom they shop, or at least make them more amenable

to the image the shopper has of them. This interpretation is entirely compatible with the conventional critique of capitalism, in which the emphasis is on the exploitation and inequalities generated by relations of production and distribution. It does, however, imply a defense of consumption as a process of value creation and not merely one of passive acquiescence to capitalist motivation or mindless hedonism.

The sheer range of commodities that are available to form part of this exercise is enormous. I believe it is possible to account for a considerable part of the current forms and trends in modern consumption in terms of the complexity of the relationships among persons in a household.[10] For example, from the point of view of commerce, a key (and highly bankable) asset is the long-term brand—a specific make of commodity that has existed for generations, such as Heinz tomato soup. Such brands can become appropriated into a family's desire to constitute itself as a descent group. The notion of a descent group is often infused with a cyclical element in kin relations, a cycle in which parents, bringing up their children as future parents, return to the models and guidance they themselves received during their socialization by their own parents. A number of key brands such as Heinz and Kellogs are available for objectifying the concept of descent group simply because of their longevity and their memorialization of the love that was borne between members of earlier generations. Soup is perhaps an obvious such case, but it is possible for a brand of toilet roll or kitchen cleaner also to evoke such generational links (usually implicitly), precisely because it becomes an invariant feature of the grocery purchasing, something that the household should never run out of. No one such commodity can bear this weight of descent constitution alone, but in many households there is a group of long-standing branded goods that stand for a continuity transcending any one generation. After all, some of these brands remained little changed during a century that saw immense shifts in social structures and cultural ideology. Some commodities have been around long enough to represent tradition, stability, and history.

These branded products are the nearest equivalents to Weiner's inalienable objects because, though the individual exemplification might change, the brand retains constancy. A study such as Pendergrast's *For God, Country and Coca-Cola* (1993) illustrates how a

brand can become a kind of Durkheimian representation of society. As Quinn has argued (1994:108–9, 134–35), the corporate logo becomes a metasymbol to be filled with a wide range of potential symbolic elements. But to generalize the material culture of consumption from such brands would be to extract a single element from a much more varied and complex range of forms.

In direct opposition to long-standing brands are fads and fashions, the designer labels whose whole purpose lies in their very transience. These are favored by youths whose primary concern is with fashion per se. They can also enter into relations of care, as in the case of a mother who is concerned that her child always have the latest thing so that he or she will not be looked down upon on the playground. The latest demand might be for goods linked to movies such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or *The Grinch,* where it is crucial precisely in which week the items are bought, but the goods might also refer back nostalgically to *Bambi* or *Snow White* as the Walt Disney events of the mother's childhood. For the fashion conscious, timing comes to dominate over form, and this is especially important where consumption expresses relations of power (Bourdieu 1984; Douglas and Isherwood 1978).

There are many other polarities in commerce similar to that between the stable and the transient in brands. Writers who concentrate on the logic of commerce tend to assume that the existence of constant contradiction is itself evidence of the ability of commerce to fool the consumer. Thus Fine (1995:151–52) attacked the marketing of dairy goods, which literally creams off the fat in order to provide a wide range of low-fat goods such as milk and yogurt but then uses the same fat to make cheeses and creamed goods. From the viewpoint of shoppers, however, there is probably nothing better suited to the tasks of shopping than shelves that exhibit contradiction. There are few shoppers today who do not use low-fat, diet-conscious goods, and it is equally rare that those same shoppers do not also want to buy rich cream desserts that gain their specialness from their direct contrast with the low-fat norm. It is this wide register of fat content that allows the housewife to compose her unique melody of provisioning, a melody whose base notes of healthy diet harmonize with the high notes of treats and rewards. It is the same register that allows her to subtly fatten up the thin child who never seems hungry while keeping such

goods away from the overweight child who is always raiding the refrigerator. Indeed, much subtler notes can be sounded, such as what "mood" the shopper is in or her displeasure when a family member has conspicuously failed to follow her advice or is behaving badly.

Behind these lie a wide range of other contradictions—whether, for example, to buy more expensive "moral" items such as organic vegetables or to emphasize the morality involved in saving money for the household by buying cheap, mass-produced goods (see Miller 2001: ch. 4). Is it worth the effort of making one's husband get involved in shopping in order for him to acknowledge its skills and importance if the result is going to be a whole set of inappropriate goods? Shopping that is often regarded as the most hedonistic, such as clothes shopping, is often just as hedged in by considerations of wider obligations, such as whether the shopper should buy goods that suggest a desire to "age gracefully" or insist on retaining clothing styles that now embarrass her teenage daughter. We might feel that the sheer variety of goods is outrageously developed, beyond any sense of need, but the primary "need" that is expressed in shopping, far from being any novel desire emergent from the presence of the goods themselves, is the preexisting and restless need created by the complexity of a social relationship. As any good novelist will demonstrate, the nuances of a human relationship manage to make even the vast range of commodities available for its expression look sparse and oversimplified. To conclude, the goods purchased by shoppers in North London did not, in the main, appear to be "about" merely social classification, nor about social status, power, exchange, or even identity. Rather, they were used to objectify social relations, a process in which the social life of things is formed through the object life of relationships, and within which all of these other factors may or may not have a presence.

One does not have to suggest that family and other relations have become more complex or nuanced as a result of the range of goods available. Insightful plays and books have been written about human relationships in plenty of periods and regions other than those of high capitalism. It is merely that objectification of those relationships is the core, pregiven need that literally feeds off the grocery store shelf as the range of commodities allows ever more precise and varied ways to meet that need. Because in Western society it is persons and relationships

between persons that have come to be the primary media through which a concept of the transcendent or the inalienable has come to be objectified, it becomes appropriate to use these highly alienable and flexible forms of material culture in much the same way that, as Weiner argued, inalienable possessions are used in other societies—that is, as the means to create and sustain objects of devotion. This may be why it is often women who are most closely associated with projects of the inalienable in the Pacific and equally with commodity consumption in the West.

Reversing the usual implications of gift and commodity exchange might have a bearing on the other main topic of this volume. It may be suggested that the same search for an objectification of inalienablity can produce both art and provisioning. Within modernity, the inalienable is sought first through processes of subjectification—that is, the reification of personhood as the only true source of the inalienable. So the concept and practice of art as a defined genre in its contemporary sense arose first through the conceptualization of persons as artists, whose pure, creative labor was then objectified in their works. As is evident in Myers's chapter in this volume, there is still pressure to construct Aboriginal people as artists in order to designate their products as art. Provisioning, by contrast, starts with alienated commodities and proceeds with its own project of subjectification in that it creates subjects out of projected desire for goods.[11] This returns goods to their role in the establishment of social relations. Art, on the other hand, objectifies through a process of abstraction from social relations in order to construct another regime of value in which the inalienable is founded upon an aura of transcendence. In short, art and provisioning represent two ideal types in modernity's search for the inalienable. Art is a process that leads from subjectification to objectification, whereas provisioning is a process that leads from objectification to subjectification. But such dualisms cannot be presented without some caveat, which I give here in the form of a conclusion.

CONCLUSION

The original contention of this chapter is that the gift in Western society is not necessarily the correct form in which to seek equivalence to the kind of gift discussed by Mauss. Far from being the instrument of

totalization and the creation of the inalienable, Western gift giving may be a highly restricted and dyadic medium by which money can enter into the classification of kinship and other relationships. Instead, there is evidence to suggest that it is the vast range of highly alienable commodities as used in basic provisioning that is germane to the primary process by which we seek to create a sense of the inalienable through the domestic microcosm, where our sense of values is objectified. Thus, if we wish to embark upon a project of comparative anthropology, we might advance farther if we reverse the gift-commodity dualism as we move from the Pacific to a Western capitalist context. Obviously, this can be reduced to a kind of semantic game. If we change the time during which the object is defined from after purchase to before purchase, the equations with terms such as alienability also change. By demonstrating how one could proceed with this discussion while reversing the standard comparison, my purpose is not to prolong the gift-commodity dualism but to end it.

The anthropological debate has not remained static. Gregory (1997) provided a robust assertion that the kind of coeval presence of the two systems that I have described in this chapter is common to most societies, and that our focus should turn to the relations of power between them, which has become a common theme. At first this seems both attractive and straightforward. We can see a kind of "hypercommodity" logic in the attempt by neoclassical economists to account for every aspect of social life, following mainly upon the example of Becker (see Fine 1998), whereas in some of the eco-warrior "alternative" lifestyle critiques of capitalism, one sees the imagination of a world where the logic of the gift overturns all other relations. Such a polarization is of course far too simplistic, and Mauss himself was trying to achieve a more considered balance in his interventions in French politics at the time. After all, as Godelier recently pointed out (1999:179–98), there are elements of the sacrificial logic of the gift that could be argued to be fundamental to the development of class and caste. And money had a fundamental if not essential role in developing modern concepts of equality (Simmel 1990). This chapter was also intended to demolish any simple relation between forms of exchange and forms of power. The task of determining how forms of exchange, or models of exchange systems idealized as gift and commodity, are

employed in conflicting relations today (see Carrier 1997; Carrier and Miller 1998) can best proceed if we transcend any prior assumption that a particular form of exchange must perforce enable or constrain a particular form of power.

This point brings out the caveat that is required by any such playing around with the dualism of gift and commodity, or indeed art and commodity. Fortunately, that caveat is well presented in the introduction to this volume. This chapter may be taken as merely one example of the more general argument made by Myers that what is required in material culture studies is a wider understanding of the construction and use of systems of value. In achieving this understanding, we must be sensitive to the dynamics by which value is transformed and revalued, and we will discover that there are many routes and institutions through which we can observe the objectification of both exchange and the inalienable.

Notes

This chapter was originally composed before the publication of Miller 1998. There is some repetition between that book and the penultimate section of this chapter.

1. By the term "gifts," I refer to that category of objects given to individuals on special occasions that would be termed gifts by my informants.

2. For an alternative contextualizaton of this section on Weiner that considers these points in terms of a history of love, see Miller 1998:128–32.

3. Alison Clarke is a tutor at the Royal College of Art, London, and professor at the Design Institute of Vienna, but she is conducting this research as a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology at University College, London (see Clarke 1998).

4. Council housing in Britain does not have the same connotation as housing projects within the United States. Until recently, it represented around a third of all housing. Maisonettes are houses in which the top and bottom floors were built to be (or to be made into) separate accommodations.

5. We were unable to include all households in the study, the main reasons being the absence of many householders during the day and my inability, owing to family commitments, to conduct much research at other times. Following our leafleting and approaching of households on Jay Road itself, only 14 of those who were able to take part during the daytime completely refused to do so. This

means that although the study represents some 30 percent of households in the street, it represents some 80 percent of households where people were available to take part. The bias this produced is clearly in favor of the kind of family-based household in which the factors I dwell on in this essay would be more pronounced. The dominant group was housewives in part-time employment. The sample is less representative of single-person or dual-person households in full-time work.

6. Just to throw in a bone of contention for the volume as a whole, I would suggest that art is similar to the gift in that it purports to be a form of totalization but in practice is merely a highly "framed" variety of money.

7. I fully recognize that thrift has many other social and cosmological roles. For example, in my analysis of shopping in Trinidad, I emphasized a quite different competitive element to thrift.

8. My 1998 study of sacrifice was based on specific parallels between stages in shopping and stages in sacrificial ritual as analyzed by Hubert and Mauss (1964) and later writers. It was not intended to refer to the colloquial idea of the self-sacrifice.

9. See Sennett 1976 for a discussion of Balzac's representation of material culture during "the fall of public man," but also Schama 1993 for an assessment of the moral discussions involved in still life.

10. I refer here to an understanding of their consumption context, which in a wider study would have to be articulated with their production context (see Miller 1997a).

11. This point arose from discussion during the seminar; I am especially grateful to Claudio Lomnitz and Webb Keane.