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4. Diamonds and Emotions

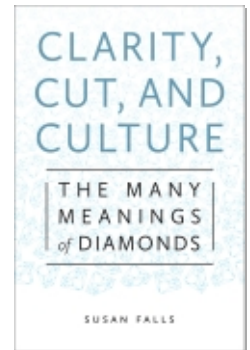
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DIAMONDS AND EMOTIONS



I met Corinne, an educational psychologist in her early thirties, through a mutual friend. When she sat down for our interview she immediately said, “Oh, diamonds, humph. I think diamonds are strange.” When asked to elaborate, she began talking about her husband, Brent, and her family in relation to diamonds. Later, when I complimented her large, emerald-cut diamond, she confided in me,

I would never tell Brent, but frankly I am ashamed of it. And I don’t always wear it. Sometimes I tell him that I’m not wearing it because I don’t want it to get stolen, or that it’s too flashy for the subway, but then whenever we go out together I always put it on and it’s special and romantic and he thinks I am proud of it, and that makes him happy. And that makes me happy.

Corinne’s husband Brent is a Wall Street stockbroker. She reported with some pride that “he makes a substantial salary,” permitting them to live in a big apartment in Chelsea, a fashionable Manhattan neighborhood. Corinne’s sisters-in-law, who live uptown, are “materialistic,” as she put it, and “concerned about status and having things that show people how much money they have. And they have a lot of it. I mean they wear their diamonds and furs to eat at the greasiest diner in town. I have diamonds

and furs too, but I would be embarrassed to be seen at a diner dressed like that.”

“But you see, I have this other diamond,” she said, becoming more animated.

“It is on a ring that came from my grandfather, and it has sapphires and rubies and—allegedly—diamonds. I mean, I have never had it appraised, so who knows if they are even real. But I don’t always wear it. In fact, I never wear it.” When I pressed her further about why she doesn’t wear her grandfather’s ring, she said, without pause, that it was because she was sure that miners were being mistreated:

Truthfully, I have very negative associations with diamonds. I am sure somebody is being exploited, I mean—don’t they come from Australia? I bet the Aborigines are the ones who have to go down into the mines to get the diamonds and they are probably treated so badly that I would not want to have any part of it. But it is from my grandfather, so I keep it and, well, he treasured it and so I do.

Corinne is sensitive to the issue of labor practices and what she sees as class-based materialism. She tries to avoid participating in an industry she believes to be unfair, but even so is drawn to maintaining the emotional bridges extended from one person to another when diamonds are gifted. Corinne experiences these ideals as countervailing sentiments, but her use of and emphasis on the phrase “but it is from my grandfather” make it plain that her familial attachments won out over her political awareness.

Contradictions like those embedded in Corinne’s personal commitments and activities (including a moral position against exploitation) turned out to constitute a salient dimension of people’s diamond narratives. As the interview proceeded, Corinne’s relationship to diamonds was shown to be fraught with multiple ambiguities, which manifest as a mix-up of affection, pride, shame, love, and even contempt. How does this happen? What does this sentimental complexity tell us? How can we systematically explain such contradictions?

Contingency and Context

As previously detailed, diamonds are produced by a complex commodity chain, one that includes advertising. Some accept only selected elements of industry-sponsored symbolism while a few take it on wholesale. Most people, though, fashion meanings that are locally situated, flexible (changing over time and across circumstance), idiosyncratic, and creative. People tend to swallow ad meanings when it comes to thinking about other people's diamonds or about diamonds in the abstract, but they reject or transform publicly circulated meanings when confronted with their own individual gems.

People's interpretations of diamonds are often deliberately, intentionally opposed to marketing. Informants claimed that although other people are duped or brainwashed by advertising, they are "smarter than that," asserting that they operate independently of larger discursive structures. People regularly expressed—in more or less direct terms—that they are aware of and consciously working against the marketing that seeks to put ideas in their heads.

Mary Sue is a pretty, single, flamboyant lawyer who lives in Park Slope. I asked her how diamonds compare to other gems she has, and whether or not she believes them to be the most attractive or most desirable of all gems. She recited ideas promoted in marketing as a foil to her preference for rubies and onyx:

Well, to me, diamonds have the most emotion attached to them because they are supposed to be tokens of love and used in engagements and things like that, so for that reason I attach a lot of emotion to them. But you know that baggage is just a huge marketing strategy and we have all bought into it, but it's not like that all over the world. I personally have not bought into it. Because well, you know my dad was sick last winter and he, I guess, knew that he didn't have much time left and so at that time he gave me a safe deposit box that contained my mom's ring—my biological mom, she had died, and her ring that he had given to her

was in there. She died when I was nineteen years old. And he also gave me his mother's—my grandmother's—diamonds. And I think they are real valuable and I've had them for almost a year, but I wouldn't even consider wearing them. I keep them in a cardboard box. They are not even insured, which is really stupid, because they are really big and expensive, but as far as how they actually look, they are not doing it for me. There is so much going on there that I can't even think about wearing them.

Mary Sue's stance toward ad symbolism as expressed in the phrase "I personally have not bought into it" is intriguing in that she tacitly acknowledges its power by striving to reject it. But more interesting is the fact that Mary Sue's diamonds are so saturated with emotion and personal history that she literally can't bear to wear them. As objects pregnant with meaning, they inhabit a category separate from all of the anonymous stones shown in ads. And that heavy emotional history is unique to Mary Sue, unshared, indexical of her circumstance, and attached only to her diamonds. Though there is a pervasive tendency to associate particular diamonds with the people to whom they once belonged, the set of meanings Mary Sue gives them is distinct, and in this sense idiosyncratic.

Icons and Indexes

To review, the sign as described by Saussurean structuralist theory is arbitrary and ahistorical; it does not specify any sense of real agency. The Peircean model, by contrast, does account for subjectivity, context, memory, and the creation of meaning with regard to material particularity, formal qualities, and temporal persistence by identifying three types of signs (symbol, icon, and index). Furthermore, as opposed to the binary Saussurean formula, Peircian signs are understood as triadic: a sign stands for something to somebody, so signification is more relational than code-like.

Icons are contingent upon the perception of likeness. For example, a portrait that resembles the person to whom it refers operates iconically. The key to the icon is structural similarity—think of metaphors and maps. In language, onomatopoeia has an iconic character; a word sounds like the thing it names, such as “snip” or “quack.” Indexes operate by spatio-temporal contiguity—like a knock on the door heralding someone on the other side. Think of a souvenir, a weather vane, or a scar. In language, words like “this” or “that,” or pronouns such as “I” are indexical signs whose meaning shifts according to context (see Crapanzano 2003). Indexes work symptomatically; they are caused by and tell us about something else, possibly remote in time and space, over there.

Saussurean signs are best subsumed within Peirce’s rubric as symbols. In both models, meaning is arbitrary and conventional. A red octagon means “Stop!” But it could have been some other way—a green octagon, or a red square. There may be historical or cultural reasons behind the choice of the red octagon, but there is no identifiable causal or structural link between a red octagon and the command “Stop!” Most linguistic elements operate symbolically.

All three sign types—icon, index, and symbol—can work together to generate meaning. Instances of “pure” symbols, icons, and indexes are rare, if they even exist, but the interpretation of any sign generally privileges one mode over another. The “semiotic ideology” shapes what kind of sign someone takes it to be—a symbol, icon, or index (Keane 2003). Semiotic ideology tells us how a sign is thought to carry meaning. It tells us, for example, which of the many aspects of a sign require interpretation.

A crucial difference between these sign models has to do with how meaning is established in the first place. Meaning is processural for Peirce; it is context bound rather than static or defined by virtue of its relations to other signs within a larger universe, as in the Saussurean system. Meaning is generated through chains of associative signification—not by virtue of binary oppositions. Peirce’s signs can, theoretically, mean anything in different given contexts and semiotic

ideologies. And remember, diamonds can serve as symbols, icons, and indexes all at the same time, the potential result of which is a rich set of possibly conflicting meanings. Using a combination of interpretive strategies can produce a set of countervailing, cacophonous sentiments—such as “love” and “shame”—associated with the same diamond. Or, a single emotive note, say “pleasure,” can be enriched when the outcome of all interpretations harmonize.

“Hey, I Pay My Power Bill on Time”

The term “motivation” describes the extent to which meaning determines or influences the form of the sign, sometimes called the “sign vehicle.” The more the form of the sign is shaped by what it means, the more motivated the sign is said to be: icons and indexes are relatively motivated, while symbols are relatively unmotivated. The less motivated the sign, the more people must learn the agreed-upon meaning, as is the case with much language. For symbols, the form of the sign is neither caused nor linked to that which it represents. Icons and indexes are more motivated than symbols in the sense that the form of the sign is understood as influenced in part by that which it represents.

Because the symbol is not motivated—not attached to its meaning in any sustained way—the meaning is vulnerable to being reassigned. Advertisers exploit this slippage, tweaking or affixing new meanings to things through repetition, as they please. People, for example, acknowledge the symbolic pairing of diamonds with glamour or femininity. (Diamonds were once signs of masculinity and virility—but there is nothing intrinsically masculine or feminine about pressed carbon.) But as reflected in Corinne’s narrative, these same people might go on to describe another set of (invented) symbolic meanings in addition to indexical and iconic ones they have developed. Corinne “gets” and recognizes that to some degree she is a participant in sustaining the ongoing construction of diamonds as a status symbol. Her conflicted interpretations and emotional responses to the diamonds she owns

emerge in the tense space between the industry-promoted and socially accepted associations having to do with status, and those meanings that arise out of her biography. She values her diamond ring as a symbol of romance, glamour, and success, and appreciates its role as a meaningful index between herself and her grandfather and her husband, but she still simultaneously worries about it as an index of mistreatment, exploitation, “materialism,” and “status-consciousness.”

That diamonds are beautiful status symbols, and that there exists a relationship between potentially ugly labor practices and diamonds on the market (Corinne is “sure somebody is being exploited”) exemplifies how one might read diamonds as a symbol but also as an index. Several themes popped up in the reading of diamonds as indexes. Some people interpreted them as symptomatic of, or as proof or evidence of, relatively distant circumstances of production or acquisition (with both positive and negative content). In much the same way that one can read backward through a souvenir to a trip taken, through a scar to an injury, or through a south-pointing weather vane to the fact that the wind is blowing southerly, people can, and they do, read (their own or others’) diamonds as indexes of socioeconomic circumstance, global inequality, family ties, characteristics of the buyer, sacrifice, relationship, life events, and so forth, even though these things, as it turns out, are poor indicators of gender, sex, class, or anything else.

And individuals do sometimes expect and even work hard to use (unreliable) diamonds as straightforward indexes, as a (pale) reflection of the way they appear in larger discourses and pragmatic contexts in which race, class, sex, and so forth are defined and performed. What we learn from this paradox is that while diamonds do not map onto demographic categories in a Bourdieuan kind of way (in terms of straightforward indexicality), they still operate as vehicles for constructing class, race, sex, and so forth at a meta-level, in terms of semiotic ideologies and consumers’ understandings of indexicality and how it works. But even these meta-level understandings can be highly individualized. Indexical ideologies and the subsequent readings they produce emerge

from creative subjects interacting with signs whose meanings are then idiosyncratic, context specific, and entirely contingent, developing in concert and/or butting heads with industry-promoted meanings, a point nicely exemplified by Ian's story.

Ian, a science fiction writer, considers himself far removed from "the mainstream." When I asked him how he felt about the practice of giving, inheriting, or receiving diamonds from loved ones, he said,

I have really started to appreciate Aileen, my ex, and our shared practicality because now I am finding that women want diamonds. They see a diamond as a symbol of "love" and "forever" and the rest of that bullshit, so, in a way—if I was thirty-five and getting married and my future wife was like, "OK, now let's go pick out a diamond," and I was actually participating in normal American society, which I don't really like to do, I know, I just know, that I would have a moment, a flash of darkness in which I would experience this feeling of "You are becoming one of them."

"One of who?" I asked. He responded,

Well I am afraid to say this almost, but OK. You know, it's like Aileen and I didn't need anything. Anything material, that is, especially a twenty-thousand-dollar rock, to illustrate our love to one another. We liked to write poems on notebook paper and that was wonderful and important. So buying a diamond and all of that is slipping into this consumerism where money is equal to emotion and it's, for me, a moment of defeat. So "them" is the people who feel like they need to buy a diamond to prove their love, as opposed to those who do it more creatively, I guess, though, maybe a diamond can be creative.

Ian rejects the symbolic marketing association of diamonds with romance, love, and materialism, thinking instead of an imagined "them" with whom he does not (want to) identify. While believing that women

want diamonds as a symbol, he reads them as proof of a lifestyle and a set of values he loathes. But his orientation to diamonds is contradictory, for he told me later that women, at least women in his family, women whom he loves and respects, value diamonds above all else “for remembering.” This remembering quality is especially strong in the way they are handed down. If he had a girlfriend who really wanted a diamond, he would get her one. He would be “more than happy to give her something that would inspire good feelings” between them, regardless of his own prejudices. The function of the gift and the production of a relationship ultimately override his critiques of consumerism and materialism.

The tendency to treat family diamonds as indexes of kinship and life events showed up at another moment in our conversation. When I asked him whether he had any diamonds, he described his family’s expectations about his inheritance:

I will be asked to inherit some diamonds, because you see my family is very matriarchal and things get passed down and I am the only guy in the family in several generations and all across the board. But we pass things down, and they are very serious about it. Like, there is this painting—and I frankly find it scary—but when somebody died—my grandfather—my cousin was like, “Now you have to go and take that painting.” And the painting is, well, there is this guy and he kind of looks like me, I think that’s why I find it disturbing, but he is holding this thing that is a cross between a basketball and a goat bladder and I have the thing wrapped in brown paper—What am I going to do with that? I don’t know. At least diamonds are small. But the most important thing for them, my mother and everybody, has to do with remembering, you know how it has been handed down, and for all the people in my family that is what those diamonds are all about. And they love to tell you about it. For hours. My mom will likely ask me to inherit the diamonds before she dies. I guess all her jewelry will be divided up and she will say, “Here take this for your girlfriend or wife,” and then I will keep them in a box or something.

That Ian thinks of the family gems as markers of kinship and life events as his mother and sisters do is doubtful, but he knows that they interpret them in this way, and this shapes the way he might eventually understand them. These stones are, at the very least, perceived by Ian among other things as signs that can have an indexical significance related to family ties and life events, even if they are kept in a box under his bed or squirreled away in a closet, like Mary Sue's, although they would be stashed for very different reasons.

The opposite of Ian is Renee, a self-described diamond aficionado. She believes herself to be not particularly moneyed, yet she owns numerous diamonds (as do many women who are not wealthy), comfortably wears them on a daily basis, and appreciates the aesthetic of precious gems. We sat at my kitchen table talking and quickly found a friendly tone. She spoke freely, with a kind humor and in a style I would describe as straightforward, not self-conscious. I was struck by her insistence that while, "of course, some people associate diamonds with those ridiculous commercials on TV, with the lovers walking in the park about to overrun an elderly couple," she also said that, in examining others' diamonds, she can

see what kind of person someone is. Everyone looks at other people's diamonds and I think this is because people are inherently competitive. But I would say that much more than that, mainly, it is the curiosity element. Because when you see diamonds, you always wonder, or I do anyway, if they got it from family or what is the story behind the diamond—you know, "How did you get it and why?" That is really the interesting part and that's the part that gives diamonds their meaning. I don't think people care about all the other stuff, especially if it is someone young. When I see a young person with a big diamond, I wonder, "Where did you get that kind of money? Or did you get that from a family member, or what?" So it's really about the history behind the diamond that makes it worth having. I remember my friend Yvonne got diamonds when they had their first baby. And Eve got one when she had her second, Richard. To me it's interesting to get the story behind the diamond because it can

be telling—like, I saw Yvonne at a party and she had one of these kind of horseshoe-shaped diamond earrings, and I commented on it, and it turns out they were part of a watch, the clasp actually, that belonged her mother-in-law, so her husband had them made into earrings for her and I thought that made it a lot more special.

We can see that Renee's first response to other people's diamonds is to try reading back through them, as indexes, to the scene of acquisition and the market value. It's not unusual to assume that others share in our own interpretive practices, and Renee clearly expects for others to back up her semiotic ideology.

Obviously, diamonds are symbols of wealth, which explains why Renee is attuned to their market value. Ian, in addition to identifying diamonds as indexes of family ties and life events, also pays attention to their market value, and, after discussing more sentimental issues, he turned to the issue of cost: "To me there are a couple of things going on with diamonds' meaning. There is the expense and value and rarity of the diamond, and that means that it is a sacrifice. When you buy a diamond, it is a financial sacrifice. Because they are expensive!" To acquire a diamond is to lay down money for it, "sacrificing" (hard-won) resources to do so. And we can point to an equivalence between diamonds and capital, an equivalence that is far from groundless. Diamonds are purchased at some point, and reading symptomatically into price not only informs Renee's and Ian's interpretations, but they may very well wish or expect others to do the same. Understanding diamonds in terms of cost is paramount for some, but this is troubled by the ease with which they are "faked," as Diana, a friend of Corinne's, pointed out.

Diana's husband works with Corinne's husband, Brent, and the four of them socialize frequently. Diana, a "stay-at-home mom" in her midthirties, explained to me that she loves diamonds and told me "I've done my research": she knows a lot about them. She "adores how they look," most especially a pair of earrings her husband gave her. Wearing them makes her feel "special and feminine." She explained,

What I really like is the glitter and sheen when it hits the sun, but this diamond is very important to me, I even have it insured, it's just worth a lot to me and to tell you the truth, I wanted stud earrings. I got them and I was ecstatic. I didn't think that I would be, but I was, and they were from Tiffany's, and I wanted to hang the tags on them so everybody would know where they came from and how expensive they were. I hated myself for thinking like that, but truthfully I was very pleased to have them.

Besides appreciating their aesthetic qualities, Diana hopes others will read the earrings as an index of that oh-so-special, oh-so-expensive purchase.

Tiffany & Co. is a high-end jewelry store, where a pair of round brilliant-cut earrings, having a total carat weight of .22 (so each weighs about .11, very much on the "small" side), with a color grade of I and a clarity grade of VS, and set in platinum can cost about \$1,000 (in 2013). Earrings with total caratage of .95, color grade I, clarity grade VS, and set in platinum cost \$8,850 (with prices partly inflated due to platinum's soaring value in the last decade). These are particularly costly diamonds because of the brand, not the size or quality, but by glance most people would not recognize them as Tiffany's diamonds. But for Diana, the brand is crucial in establishing how she feels about them. In fact, she mentioned only parenthetically that her husband had given them to her, but became most lively and eager when discussing Tiffany's, her pride in possessing such an item, and the fact that she wished others would recognize them as she did. Her interpretive work is strongly related to branding, luxury, price, status, and aesthetic overtones, as in, "what I really like is the glitter and sheen when it hits the sun." Her conflicted feelings of embarrassed self-condemnation ("I hated myself for thinking like that"), pride ("but truthfully I was very pleased"), and desire to show off her status ("I wanted to hang the tags on them"), along with her feeling feminine, special, and loved unfold from countervailing interpretations of meaning, both indexical and symbolic. The complex set of meaning-making strategies come together as she, consciously or unconsciously

(probably a little bit of both), selects certain aspects of symbolic meanings in combination with others germane to her own situation.

In casting indexical value into relief, one might complain that we are right back to a discussion of diamonds in relation to economic status, which to some extent is true. But really, the relationship of meaning to material conditions, that is to say the kind of relationship that ties the diamond to status, is in this case indexical; it's not symbolic. There exists a real-world component to purchase and possession, and it is anything but arbitrary. Structuralist and poststructuralist readings of commodity meanings do not address this issue, since they focus on the social significations that symbolic objects, like diamonds, carry—and they do so without any sustained concern for the material or social circumstances surrounding a specific object. A straightforward political-economy approach would also link diamonds to class, aligning economic resources with status claims, but might miss crucial subjective renderings that are important to consumers themselves and discernible through a broader semiotic inquiry. While the consumption of Diana's diamonds is related to status (class), using the framework of the symbolic alongside the indexical provides a more nuanced view of commodity semioses. Because indexes are grounded in temporality and material circumstance, their meanings are often less flexible than their symbolic counterparts. Unlike symbols, indexes require spatio-temporal contiguity, or a causal relationship: one acquires and then exchanges cash to buy the Tiffany earrings. The issue of status or class remains in focus, but deliberately treating it as index rather than symbol highlights the mechanics of acquisition.

Zach describes an even more clear-cut example of interpreting diamonds as an index of money. A 38-year-old teacher, Zach occasionally wears diamond studs to snazz up an outfit. He only wears them on occasion because “it's not always appropriate.” Wearing them is “about vanity. I mean they are not exactly expensive, but after all they are diamonds. It's like walking around with hundred-dollar bills taped to my ears. They are a low-level status symbol. It says, ‘Hey, I pay my power bill

on time!” Having them indexes his “ability to produce.” Zach’s diamonds are understood as a direct exchange for money, indeed, very much like hundred-dollar bills taped to his ears, and his semiotic ideology can therefore be said to reflect indexical rather than symbolic interpretation. Interestingly, though people claim to interpret diamonds as indexes of cash, most admit that they cannot evaluate how much diamonds are worth, even their own, nor can they recognize simulants by sight. Taken together, these factors make the diamond a pretty strange status index or symbol.

Even experts, we know, cannot always tell a real from a simulant or synthetic (lab-produced) diamond, although some consumers insist that they can spot a fake when they see one. This ambiguity is worth exploring; it distinguishes diamonds even further, because using them for status purposes is risky since they may be taken for fakes. Brooke, a real-estate broker, asserted that “most people equate diamonds with wealth, which is wrong, because you can get a CZ [cubic zirconia] the size of your head and who will know? No one!” Diana said she would happily take a fake diamond if it were bigger than the real diamond that she already owns, because “the imitations are so easily taken for real that nobody can tell the difference, so, I mean, for all intents and purposes, the fake ones are real!”

The context of acquisition plays a principal role in interpretation. There is an implied distinction between a market diamond (one that is for sale or that is being bought) versus a gift diamond (one that has been received as a gift or through inheritance), which can be fruitfully interrogated using Annette Weiner’s (1992) notion of “inalienability,” and, in particular, the idea of “cosmological authentication,” where wealth represents the objectification of identity (in this case, kinship). Inalienability in this context has to do with objects that should not be sold or given away except under special circumstances. There are relatively few types of these objects in the use-and-toss world of American consumerism, but some kinds of jewelry do carry these stipulations. Diamond engagement wear as well as other diamond gifts can come to

inhabit this category (a fact supported by the normal commodity chain that does not encourage the repurposing of diamonds—in fact, “used” stones have an extremely low resale value). But thinking of meaning as pegged to acquisition can be risky, especially as kin relationships may change in unpredictable ways.

But a diamond can work like a powerful souvenir—Remember this? Remember when?—as a marker of events, relationships, or transactions; and as a site where emotions and memories are projected, so much so that it appears that the diamond itself is the actual repository of that significance. In this sense material culture becomes active—motivating people to do things—rather than working like a passive screen for interpretation. Tina, a young woman who had recently moved to New York, bases her interpretation on an acquisition that is largely absent status considerations, yet is firmly tied to a financial equivalence and to the general social sense of symbolic value nonetheless. Pointing to a small stone in a ring she was wearing, she said,

This one, from my grandmother, is a diamond. I had it appraised once and the guy was like, “It’s worth one hundred dollars.” I was really disappointed. You see she had either been lying to me or maybe she was just mistaken, I don’t know, but it was a real blow to me. Because you see she had given it to me before I came here and it was supposed to be for a last resort, I could sell it, she said. “If you get into trouble, you sell this.” And so it was like having money in the bank, in a special savings account, but right here on my hand instead of in some dark vault. I really looked at this as an investment. And it ties me to her. We were really close. You know, many antiques are really just savings accounts, and the thing is that they become more valuable over time, just like interest, that is how I see this.

Tina’s diamond is first and foremost an index of kinship, then a financial instrument. As conditions changed (when she discovered the stone was not worth much), so did her interpretation, and although one layer of

her reading is contingent on agreed-upon social conventions, another connects her to family. The diamond is like a metaphorical cairn directing her to her grandmother.

But this economic aspect can take on a more sinister cast. For Deborah, a park ranger married to Jason, a music video producer, consuming diamonds is an index of ignorance and a lack of compassion. But her attitude is somewhat ambivalent. I had asked her about Jason giving her a big, expensive diamond. She responded with disdain, “Jason would, he knows—well, he better know!—not to ever come home with something like that for me.” Still, she wears a diamond engagement ring, while she is aware of and rejects symbolic associations offered by the industry in favor of her own ideas. For diamonds she does not yet have, her interpretation is shaped by her knowledge of how they are produced:

I saw a show on TV that was really horrible, showing how the mining industry takes advantage of children, and they don't pay anyone, and how they just fake the price. It's all artificial, like it's all a big fraud and the consumer is tricked. What came to my mind was: “Wow! It's all a myth!” Just a few companies and weird practices in place to keep up this myth about how rare they are and I bet they are real easy to come by. I don't know how they get them, but I know that they are not rare and that a lot of people get exploited. Personally I don't want to support the exploitation, or the myth. I wish everyone would find out about what those people do in Sierra Leone and then they would mean something different, something real: what they stand for is exploitation.

But Deborah was also adamant in saying that she wears her diamond because it belonged to Jason's mother, and is therefore acceptable. The difference for her is—a subtle point—that Jason cannot purchase a new diamond. As others suggested, those diamonds already in the family assume a special condition that new ones do not, cannot, possess. From Deborah's perspective, family diamonds are completely different from

those on retail shelves that, as the fruit of a wretched market, indexically “stand for exploitation.”

“Do You Have Anything to Skatell Me?”

The *icon* represents by resembling. By way of contrast, *symbols* work by habit: I am habituated to associating the (word/sound) symbol “tree” with ideas and images that correspond with really tall, barky plants. We are similarly habituated to thinking about diamonds in certain ways; that diamonds are a symbol of love or femininity is drilled into us over time. An *index* is grounded in temporal-spatial causality: the index has a direct existential connection with its object. For example, in Samuel Butler’s sentence, “Her face . . . was a fair index to her disposition,” the woman’s disposition motivates her face to take on a smile. A smile indexes happiness.

An icon should not, however, be understood—as the word is ordinarily employed—to refer to things like the Christian cross, a painted representation of a sacred article or personage, a known and enduring symbol, or an idol. It is closer to the original Greek εἰκών, translated as *eikon*, from *eikenai*, which means “to be like” or “to seem.” Diamonds are understood iconically when their qualities or features are taken as metaphors, as diagrammatic of some other idea, fact, value, or, perhaps, fantasy.

Though the matter is more involved than is necessary for our purposes here, it is worth mentioning how Peirce (1903, 4.447) conceptualizes the icon:

An icon is a representamen of what it represents and for the mind that interprets it as such, by virtue of its being an immediate image, that is to say by virtue of characters which belong to it in itself as a sensible object, and which it would possess just the same were there no object in nature that it resembled, and though it never were interpreted as a sign. It is of the nature of an appearance, and as such, strictly speaking, exists only in

consciousness, although for convenience in ordinary parlance and when extreme precision is not called for, we extend the term icon to the outward objects which excite in consciousness the image itself. A geometrical diagram is a good example of an icon. A pure icon can convey no positive or factual information; for it affords no assurance that there is any such thing in nature. But it is of the utmost value for enabling its interpreter to study what would be the character of such an object in case any such did exist. Geometry sufficiently illustrates that.

Consumers treat diamonds less often as icons than they do as indexes or symbols. Of course, formal properties—brilliance, fire, clarity, size, hardness, and so forth—are understood metaphorically, standing for a range of ideas.¹

Much to my surprise, after Ian ended his talk about memory, kinship, and romance, he launched into a rhapsodic detour into the topic of diamonds' brilliance—though that word is mine; he didn't use it himself. He said,

To me there are a couple of things going on with the meaning of diamonds. First, there is the way that it reflects the light. But the light thing is, well, I mean, you look in there and the light is literally bouncing all around, and you get inspired. So, with the right cut and if it's a good diamond, I guess it's better. And it is sparkling, and you just feel like this thing is different from anything else. It's hard to describe because it's like describing the taste of tequila to someone who has no idea about it, or the flavor of a lime versus a lemon. I am not very poetic, I guess; it's hard to describe, but anyway, there is the visual, sensual aspect of diamonds, and it is a very pure experience. Looking into a diamond is stimulating to the eye. And I think that light is often associated with Christianity, and add to that the idea of the spirit or soul that is in there and people talk about when they die, there is the light and God has a big light around him, so I think the fact that it seems to have this really special intense light makes it a kind of spiritual object, and it makes it

perfect to use as a symbol for something that stands between, or brings together, two souls.

Here, Ian considers how to privilege the formal quality of refraction to think about the diamond as an object that bridges or binds: one that “stands between, or brings together, two souls.” This is reminiscent of diamonds’ symbolic association with romance, but the meaning here is motivated by the character of the diamond itself, and is, therefore, more properly understood as iconic. It’s an important distinction. It reintroduces sensuality and materiality back into the consumption equation, showing that goods, after all, are not just empty containers to be filled with industry-produced ideas.

The play of light figured into other people’s interpretations, but in different ways. Like Ian, Daphne saw the diamond as a brilliant entity, but she’d developed a darker constellation of iconic significations. A curious, intense, intelligent, efficient, and compassionate woman, Daphne is a visiting nurse, moving from hospital to hospital in temporary appointments. She thus has the opportunity to learn from each place, bringing what she has seen elsewhere to new environments peopled with new, same-but-different cases. We were talking about the diamond she inherited from her mother, and her engagement ring, which embraces a small diamond. Mostly we talked about her feelings about the inherited stone. She explained the circumstances under which she came to have it, beating out her manipulative brother, who “was trying his best to get it for himself.” The stone suggests unpleasant memories of her mother’s death, a lifetime of family strife, and discomfort with her mother’s insistence on and pleasure in what Daphne described as wearing something showy and actually aggressive. Later our conversation turned to Daphne’s job, and she described how she asks patients about their jewelry as a way to relax them and to while away the time.

A few days later, she called me to say that she had been thinking about why she dislikes diamonds: their “black-hole effect,” she said. At first, I thought she was talking about a dark-centered diamond or the “fish-eye”

effect that occurs when a diamond is not prepared close to “ideal cut” standards, so I started asking her about cut and light.

“No, no, no, I don’t know anything about these things.” The problem is that they “suck the life out of you. They pull you in. I mean you look in there and it’s like a well that could suck you in, and you would never come back.”

Of particular interest is the relationship between an (inanimate) object’s personality and its anthropomorphized characteristics, like winking or blinking. Diamonds, whatever else they stand for, can act as a metaphor for character. For example, Renee combines diamonds as an index of kinship and finance with diamonds as an iconic representation of personality. We had stumbled onto the topic of big, fake diamonds when she told me about her friend whose diamonds mirror her character:

I look at people’s diamonds and sometimes I question if it is real or not, I mean you can’t tell, but sometimes circumstances make me think. I have this one friend, Lissa, and she showed up one day with this really huge diamond ring and told me how her husband got it for her, and, I mean, she doesn’t even have a dishwasher, but here she is with this big ring, and to tell you the truth I wondered about her priorities. I mean she had told me before that she doesn’t like to cook because they don’t have a dishwasher, and I was thinking to myself, “If you can afford to buy a ring like that, surely you can afford a dishwasher.” Then she told me it was fake! I think it was Skatell.

Skatell is a synthetic jeweler and they make quote diamonds, and Lissa is always joking, “Do you have anything to Skatell me?” Because she wears stuff like that and well, about that one ring, I was cracking up when she told me it was fake, but it doesn’t change anything because it’s funny. I mean the thing was so big and obnoxious and she is very gregarious and outgoing, and I thought it just fit her personality. It’s too big for me, but it looked great on her. This thing was huge! I mean it was like the Star of India! No, not that big, but about I don’t know, like five carats. I myself

wear fake diamonds all the time, and I have some great fake jewelry, and I love it because you don't have to worry about it and it looks just as pretty.

I heard again and again people discussing the extent to which this or that kind of cut or size or setting “fit” their personality. Renee’s focus on size and the “wow factor” of Lissa’s Skatell is a good example of a metaphorical, iconic rendering where such a “loud” object would not be in keeping with her self-image but would be for her friend. The “clean” or “pure” look of the diamond is also understood metaphorically.

Brooke told me that when she got engaged, she didn't want a diamond ring. Her fiancé gave her one anyway, and, in the end, she was thrilled. She drew a direct analogy between the diamond's “clean and pure beauty” and her own “clear thinking style” and “no-frills personality” in explaining why it is appropriate:

As far as diamonds go, now that I have one—I never gave them a thought before this, but anyway, now that I have one—I recognize that they are just clean, pure beauty, and so I understand why they are so sought after. Other gems don't appeal to me and I think that's because I am a clean thinker, I am not an impressionistic thinker, I'm a black-and-white kind of person. Not frilly at all. So I think the clean lines of the diamond really suit me. It reflects my personality. “Simply elegant” is the way I like to think of it. And “clean” means that there is not a lot of room for interpretation. I am not a florally person. I wear black and white every day. I am not an impressionistic person; I am “what you see is what you get.” So when I say diamonds are clean, that's what I mean, that you can see what you get and that's it.

The diamond's clarity is iconic of her own self-image.

Brooke focuses on aesthetic, material characteristics, but she's proud that the unusual cut and setting attract attention when she goes shopping or is out with friends. When her fiancé explained that he wanted her to have a diamond, insisting she have one, he said it was because other

people would be paying attention and if she didn't have a diamond, or it was of poor quality, it would reflect poorly upon him. Convinced that peers might read her diamond as an index of her husband's ability, and even his willingness, to provide, she capitulated. The intertwining of indexicality, symbolism, and iconicity can bring about responses that are positive or negative, or somewhere in between. Brooke aligns herself, explains herself, and narrates herself in positive terms through an iconic reading, and a weaving of the diamond's indexical and symbolic characters.

I met Stephanie, an Iyengar instructor, at a yoga workshop. We found ourselves talking after the session. I told her about my project and asked if she would be willing to be interviewed. She excitedly agreed, saying that she had already thought a lot about this very topic. At a nearby coffee shop she explained that she likes diamonds and even has a few. Her mother had given her one diamond, plus she had previously married and divorced. Then she became engaged to someone else, but just before the wedding was supposed to take place, she "realized that it was all wrong" and canceled everything. Both her former husband and her former fiancé had given her a diamond. Partly because of these previous relationships, she and Charles, her current husband, "had discussed in depth whether or not to buy another diamond, and what it would mean within their relationship." Charles was surprised that Stephanie, who describes herself as unconventional and a "free-thinker," even wanted a diamond. But after lengthy talks, he came to see things as she did, and Stephanie now wears both a diamond engagement and a diamond wedding ring.

For her, a heightened sense of appreciation, love, and desire is reinforced by her interpretive strategy, which includes symbolic, iconic, and indexical modes. Stephanie reads diamonds as symbolic of romance and as a promise for a man "to be present" in the marriage. As icons, diamonds represent to her the intent to work to "make the marriage endure, like the diamond does." Indexes again have direct existential connections with their objects: for her, the outlay of money demonstrates a man's willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the marriage.

Stephanie's circumstances, behaviors, and memories, in addition to her knowledge and participation in American society, all shape her interpretation of her diamonds, which contains hybridized and braided combinations of iconicity, indexicality, and symbolism:

I think that this diamond is symbolic of embracing the best union possible; it represents the ideal between a man and a woman. The diamond is the ideal gem in a lot of ways: it says, "We will strive to be the best for each other," and it reminds you of that when you look at it. Diamonds, I mean they have all these connections, and I am a woman in the modern age, and I just think that they are gorgeous so I have an emotional response, and maybe it is conditioned into my consciousness through advertising although it sure doesn't feel like that to me. [She paused to think about this for a moment.] No, it doesn't feel like that. But I do have a startling emotive response that just stops me whenever I see one. I can't even imagine other stones being able to create the same allure since, well, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but the light and the translucence of diamonds do catch the eye whereas the darker stones or other kinds of stones just can't do that. They don't do that. So, it is the simplicity that is important. I don't know how to describe it, but a diamond is like the essence of something and this essence is reflected in the context.

After I asked her to explain what she meant by "essence," she responded, "Simplicity is part of the whole transaction of meaning because a diamond is pithy essence; it is beautiful and long lasting. It endures anything."

As an analytical method, relying on only the symbolic to interpret meaning fails to capture the fullness of Stephanie's meaning making. Meaning springs iconically from hardness, purity, and simplicity, but the presence of industry-marketed symbolism and notions of sacrifice (read indexically) are also at play. All three are braided together. The complexity of interpretation can be approached in a systematic fashion by considering it as a process that emerges from subjects who have

individual histories, hopes, and imaginations but who are only naturally located in the social and political context in which they are exposed to—even bombarded at times by—marketing-speak. On the other hand, notions of gender, marriage, and family associated with diamonds are as culturally constructed as brand significance is—in fact, they are at least partly co-constitutive.

Icons, indexes, and symbols are not in reality discrete modes of interpretation; each really contains bits and pieces of the others. By getting down to the way consumers understand diamonds—or other things—as icon or index in addition to symbol, we can systematically investigate the way material culture mediates everyday experience in ways that are both like and unlike language. Contemporary material culture theory could do more to elucidate the subjectivity at the core of consuming by considering the idiosyncrasy there. As is currently under discussion in linguistics, the field of cultural studies benefits by recognizing idiosyncrasy (Johnstone 1996, 2001). We need the capacity to enter the matrix of time and space where individuals are positioned—there we can address the phenomenological aspect of consumerism while maintaining sensitivity to macro-scale issues of political economy and marketing. Analysis of consumers' meaning making with a Peircian semiotic helps achieve this goal. The following chapters explore what the poetic and the performative—predicated as they are on integrating symbolic, iconic, and indexical signage—say about us as creative agents.