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6. Diamonds and Performance

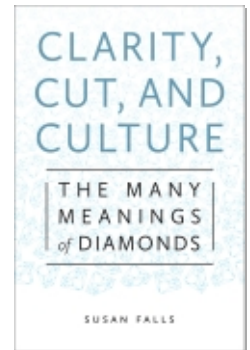
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DIAMONDS AND PERFORMANCE



Carla and Gene, successful thirty-somethings, live uptown. Carla writes children's books. Gene is a novelist. Carla and I scheduled a meeting to talk in a bar in downtown Manhattan. She arrived wearing a suit and lugging a briefcase overflowing with papers. After some small talk, Carla told me that when she and Gene were first married, five or six years ago, she had refused to wear a ring, much less a diamond. Then her aunt, seeing that she was without, gave her one to wear. Her aunt was very excited and proud to be able to give Carla a diamond. Because it was a gift from a close family member, and because she didn't want to seem ungrateful, Carla felt obliged not only to accept it but to wear it. As previewed in the introduction, she told me,

I could not have cared less about wearing a diamond, really, but I have been surprised, because what turns out to be the most important thing, or the thing I notice the most I should say, is the way people react—and that's why I want Gene to wear a ring, I insist that he wear one, now. I mean when people see this they back off. My aunt gave me this and I really didn't even want to wear it or even have it. But it's growing on me. Actually, I had to get it reset because it had this really high setting and it looked like a rocket that was about to be launched, and I didn't like that, so this is better. But you cannot believe the way people, men actually, just automatically look at a diamond. And men were always hitting on me, at

the gas station, at bars, wherever they are, but they take one look at this and they are gone. Usually.

Carla thinks wearing a diamond causes men to behave differently than they might otherwise. She counts on the fact that men who would venture to approach her are themselves aware of, and accept, a convention that “will keep them from hitting on [her].” She uses her diamond to control her social environment, and in this sense, it has a forceful, performative potential. Her diamonds says, “I’m taken. Don’t get any ideas!”

Diamond performances take place in a social landscape, but their insertion in this landscape is varied because agency and creativity loom large. The presence of performative elements in the diamond narratives I collected suggests that a focus on the individual—who is embedded in a social group, discursive universe, and commodity chain—will help clarify how diamonds are used in the everyday making of life. Rather than thinking of these elements of commodity-hood as embedded one inside another, in the fashion of Russian nesting dolls, an entanglement metaphor is more apt, as individuals draw on ideas, memories, and relationships in the direct presence of diamonds. These emerge with greater vigor in people’s narratives of interpreting diamonds than do the more distant marketing images or norms of identity production, though the impact resulting from those factors is significant and cannot be ignored.

Doing Things

We experience, know, react, and enact our will via material culture. The meanings that objects carry can be produced through social discourse, like advertising, but we have seen that when it comes to particular objects, meaning is also local and downright personal. And the space between the socially shared and the locally personal can be exploited for performative usage.

Combining insights garnered from Austin’s (1962) *How to Do Things with Words* with the growing attention to idiosyncrasy in linguistics,

this chapter examines how diamonds are wielded. Consumers reported that they, and others, use diamonds in ways that suggest “performance,” but they do so contextually, with intended outcomes shifting over time and place. By “performance,” I mean that diamonds, rather than merely describing, or constating, actually impact circumstances; they, in other words, have consequences. Wearing a diamond can be part a performative action meant to change the world in some observable way. Diamonds do things.

Austin’s taxonomy of linguistic elements distinguishes *performatives*, words that “do things,” from *constantives*, which are descriptive. Performatives are utterances that do not describe, report, or merely refer but are actually part of an action with consequences that follow. Working with first-person utterances, Austin identifies several types of performative language acts, including the “declaratory” (as in “I declare war” or “I dub thee knight”) and the “contractual” (as in “I bet” or “I promise”), in which saying something makes it so.¹ Performatives are neither true nor false, but they are more or less successful depending upon the conditions under which they are uttered. Austin describes how the context must be felicitous for success—if and only if the conditions and intention are appropriate will the performative action succeed. In Austin’s example, to declare war, you must both be in a position to declare war and be sincere. So, when “I declare war!” is uttered, war is actually declared, setting off a series of events.

The diamond, like ordinary language, can also be understood as performative à la Austin. They can be deployed as a performative prop, a necessary but not quite sufficient ingredient in elbowing circumstances in a given direction. And here, felicitous conditions may be conventional and/or idiosyncratic.

Homo Performans

As a cipher or prop, diamonds allow people to inhabit a kind of stage upon which to present, imagine, or act out plays about themselves (and

sometimes others). These stages and plays may be reserved for the self alone, or for those real or imagined others. Given that, a theatrical metaphor supports the use of the Austinian concept of performative in clarifying how material culture is used for particular ends.

Erving Goffman (1958), focusing on impression management through controlled, sometimes negotiated behavior, developed a dramaturgical paradigm to examine the dynamics of social relationships. My use of the term “performative” draws from Goffman a sensitivity to the impact of context and circumstance on meaning making outside of the realm of plays, concerts, and lectures, in what Milton Singer (1984) calls publicly communicative “cultural performances.” And because these plays can be directed at the self, a strongly reflexive dimension should be added to the notion of cultural performance, as in Victor Turner’s (1986, 81) formulation:

If man is a sapient animal, a tool-making animal, a symbol-using animal, he is, no less, a performing animal, *Homo performans*, not in the sense, perhaps that a circus animal may be a performing animal, but in the sense that a man is a self-performing animal—his performances are, in a way, reflexive, in performing he reveals himself to himself. This occurs in two ways: the actor may come to know himself better through acting or enactment; or one set of human beings may come to know themselves better through observing and/or participating in performances generated and presented by another set of human beings.

Material culture too can be used to (culturally) perform the self to the self (reflexively) or to others, but it isn’t always certain how these performances are received. An example: one woman suggested that people who wear diamonds are ostentatious but that she wears them differently. In fact, she would love to have a large, emerald-cut stone, but does not consider herself a showy person:

Mostly I see diamond jewelry as frivolous and a real marker of excess and also status seeking. I mean in earrings there are even two of them! So it’s

diamonds times two! That's showy. I might want something like that, but it would be special and I would probably feel self-conscious at first. But I would also feel beautiful. Special.

Throughout our interview she described people who wear diamonds as flashy and concerned with creating an impression of money or status, but for her, she sees them as a way to make herself feel a certain way: beautiful and special.

Felicitous Performance

As part of a semiotic ideology, social convention informs the way we approach material culture and what roles it can play in performative acts. For instance, we habitually break a bottle of champagne over the bow of a ship upon its maiden voyage, not a bottle of soda or a vase filled with flowers. Convention dictates that we use champagne. Diamonds are also called for in conventionally defined cultural performances, a point forcefully made by Allen. He had recently proposed to his girlfriend, but said that he knew almost nothing about diamonds beforehand and that he had done a lot of internet research and talking with his female friends and colleagues before making a purchase. When "I asked for her hand, I knew that I had to present her with a diamond," he explained. In an aside, he confided that truthfully he did not want to buy one: "You can put me down as anti-diamond. As far as being a requirement, I think it's pretty much just silly. But," he continued, "I didn't even think about getting another stone because, you know, the diamond is a requirement, I could not imagine proposing without a diamond because then it [the proposal] would not be real." Two felicity conditions—(a) the sincerity of Allen's proposal and (b) the diamond—are ingredients that are necessary, but each standing alone is insufficient to make an authentic proposal. From Allen's point of view a diamond's presence is necessary to the successful execution of the proposal. Conversely, it is the proposal that makes this particular diamond a symbol of a promise to marry.

The “requirement” of a diamond in legitimizing a proposal is an American social convention, a tradition, we recall, so strongly promoted by De Beers marketers. In highlighting the historical conventionality of the engagement stone, it is instructive to compare American practices to those in Europe, where De Beers tried but failed to promote the same tradition. Shared ideas about legitimizing props—felicity conditions—can also develop locally, so a working theory of commodity performativity needs to account for both socially shared and locally devised felicity conditions (which may not reflect the industry-engineered tradition at all).

Illustrating just how short industry discourse falls from achieving hegemony is the perspective of Margaret, Allen’s fiancée. Margaret works at a TV station, and when I went to visit her in her midtown Manhattan office, we sat at her large desk overlooking the Hudson River. She calmly explained that she really didn’t care about receiving a diamond from Allen, but beseeched me, “Don’t ever tell him that!” To her, a sincere proposal alone would have been felicitous enough to take seriously.

More obviously idiosyncratic interpretations popped up in interviews, especially when diamonds are used to stage narratives. Some women said that they use jewelry to mark status, but diamonds can also create and maintain specific narratives. Particular stones sometimes become fetishized, taking on special meanings and becoming stewed in memories, fantasies, or plots, overthrowing “A Diamond Is Forever.” Here, meaning becomes naturalized to the extent that people think of it as part of the diamond itself, as if emanating from it, or even embedded in it, rather than seeing the stone as something upon which a set of meanings is imputed.

When treated as a repository for memories, diamonds become sites of condensation—like a souvenir or touchstone—for private imaginaries that can be made public through talk. Semiotically, their use as props often involves indexicalization, where people read a causal history into acquisition, for example, and then take the diamond as a stand-in for those circumstances. In this way, it is a cairn, marking the way to

an internal landscape that can be translated into a public story while simultaneously representing indexical “proof” of those circumstances.

Over and above their use as touchstone, diamonds are sometimes implicated in producing outcomes, and then used to represent that outcome. They can, for instance, be acquired or redistributed in association with rites of passage such as births, graduations, weddings, and deaths. Mary Sue explained that a diamond, given to her when she graduated from high school, marked an entrance into the world of adults for her and her family, and that wearing this diamond, which she thought was “incredibly valuable and glamorous,” not only worked to recall a rite of passage but actually carried her over from adolescence to full personhood. Because a similar gift had been given to her sister, local family tradition had rendered the diamond a necessary—“felicitous,” in Austin’s terms—element in making the rite of passage happen. From where she stood, donning this “valuable pendant” literally helped metamorphose her into a woman. The diamond is performative, perhaps magical in the force it exerts, in addition to carrying culturally shared symbolic meanings such as glamour. Mary Sue’s semiosis can be understood as a foil against the idea that meaning resides in a code, a priori and external to the individual and his or her context. The significance of her “passage diamond” is a family activity that is accurately, though not unrelatedly, understood as an event in a restricted context rather than as an object cohering to a social code produced by industry discourse. Of course, the latter is partially entangled with the former.

The Declaratory: Is That Real?

Commodity studies tracking relationships between social groups and consumption—especially those linking political economy to social practices, and consumption patterns to social structures—tend to focus on class, usually understood as a socioeconomic category. The idea that commodity preference is correlated to class has been most elaborately explicated in the work on taste by Pierre Bourdieu (1984). Much, much

less has been done on consumerism from the perspective of individual consumers, and neither subjectivity nor agency have received due attention (see Daniel Miller 1998 as an exception). This focus on the analysis of consumption at the level of social organization begins as far back as Thorstein Veblen's 1899 classic, *A Theory of the Leisure Class*.

Veblen linked consumerism to declarations of class. In approaching consumption from a perspective grounded in time, emulation, and material experience, his attention to conspicuous consumption has been influential in academia and in mainstream public discourse (even shaping advertising strategy), although clearly the relationship between consumption and class is far more complex than Veblen suggests. He did, however, explicitly explore the relationship between class and consumption using a semiotic model amenable to a Peircian symbol-index-icon framework, in that conspicuous consumption includes consuming goods that are symbols (which Veblen called the "insignia" or "badge" [1899, 46]), as well as those cast as indexes, where goods are understood as tangible results of productive labor (having certain goods is "proof" of financial success), and as icons, the consumption of which is to be emulated. Conspicuous consumption is a performance in which commodities and other entities (such as having a wife who is a woman of leisure) are wielded in symbolic and status claims, but having these things is itself an index of a person's wealth. The idea of "pecuniary emulation," where consumption of class insignias or indexes is practiced by those of a lesser status, can best be understood under the rubric of Peircian iconicity in which resemblance motivates acquisition and consumption of goods.

The relationship of status to emulated—or fake—diamonds is troubled by the ease with which they are simulated. A closer look at the semiotics of emulation shows why simulants can be a powerful status symbol (that is, one that powerfully marks status), and why a "knock-off" lacks a declaratory punch. Fake diamonds are icons, having abstracted from diamond certain qualities to emulate: Moissanite, for example, is a simulant that "refers" to diamond in clarity, hardness, and dispersion

through similitude, but not in “rarity,” which is part of the discourse that maintains its market and symbolic value and creates the possibility for interpreting diamond as indexical of financial standing or status. Cheap cubic zirconia, even softer (and less expensive) than Moissanite, gives off a bright fire and has even less semantic force than Moissanite. Its similarity to the real thing is degraded, more visibly fake, and, because its artifice is revealed, it calls attention to itself as what it is: an icon. Through the lens of conspicuous consumption, wearing cubic zirconia may mark one—powerfully—as an emulator, occupying a “lesser” status than the bearer of a diamond.

While the issue of authenticity is challenged by the relative ease of simulating diamond, any purported correlation between display and socioeconomic class is problematic because of the wide spectrum of ideas Americans entertain about wealth and conspicuous display. Even though some people I interviewed reported that diamonds are for the elite, others characterized inverse relationships between alleged wealth and/or status and conspicuous consumption, which can render one “tacky.” Tom told me that in terms of wearing larger, more expensive diamonds, “Wealthy people do not engage in such behavior.” A number of consumers said things like, “People with money do not wear big diamonds,” while others stated that diamonds are used as declarations in an “attempt to convince people that they have status when they really don’t.” Large diamonds are sometimes associated with wealth, but wearing them was also deemed a “vulgar display” or “obnoxious.” Wearing big diamonds was also associated with the *nouveau riche*, a group described as the economic equals of the upper class, but constituting a separate category because of their failed emulation. Applying authenticity as a mode of evaluation in both cases, for diamonds and for class, points to (actually is itself an index of) the existence of a normative state of affairs where real diamonds and real wealth are the legitimate, unmarked, and semantically powerful cases standing in contrast to degraded, inauthentic fakes (“zirconia” and the *nouveau riche*).

In what way do these pieces of polished gravel act as status markers? Allen, who had done “extensive research” about bigger diamonds, explained,

When I see bigger diamonds I am—now especially that I know how much they cost— am like “Oh my God, look at that thing! That’s too flashy!” or “It’s fake!” It’s too superficial to be like that, and I think there is an inverse relationship to an extent—I mean that is how I think of it, and it’s all just appearance and probably nothing underneath.

Like Allen, Tim, a 35-year-old human relations officer, explained that he doesn’t “like to see people wearing large diamonds,” since he is “more impressed by a small, simple stone with a lot of personal meaning, because to be otherwise is a sign of superficiality.” Allen’s use of “superficial” suggests that he thinks others believe wearing flashy diamonds is a convincing performance of wealth but that their efforts are doomed—authentic wealth does not employ such loud performances. Tim’s use of the term also points to inauthenticity, though of a personal rather than of a material sort. Similar beliefs that big diamonds create an impression of tastelessness and indicate a probable absence of class or “real wealth,” variously constructed, were shared by more than a few. But size is relative: there was virtually no agreement on what counts as “too big” or the value at which a diamond becomes vulgar. A convincing declaratory performance of wealth with diamonds is evidently pretty tricky business.

Still, people do associate diamonds with class. I spoke with women who overtly strategize to achieve financial success (or help their husbands to do so), so that they can “acquire bigger diamonds so other people will know that we have arrived”—very much a Veblenesque scenario. Some people plan to “trade up” as soon as possible, exchanging what they currently own for larger stones (for a price, of course), while others celebrate the “sweetness” or “special attachment” to even very small diamonds—professing they “would never want any other stone.”

Tommy, a young professional, bought a diamond for his wife. He thought it was an extravagant expense, but she really wanted a particular shape and size. “I decided to go ahead and make the investment,” he said, but still he worries about the future expense involved in trading up, something for which his wife has already expressed a desire. He continued,

The older you are, the bigger jewelry you can get away with wearing, and that’s why they have this trade-up program where I got the stone. This is really geared toward more materialistic people when really it should just have sentimental value, but my wife wanted it so I enrolled and now in the future we can turn in that stone and get a bigger one. The only thing is that the next one has to cost twice as much as the first one did so it’s like I have to buy it all over again!

Trading up is an arrangement for the future that retailers now offer: consumers can exchange their purchase for a larger stone, usually at a slightly discounted price, but the arrangement may contain caveats, such as that the new one must be twice as large as the old one.

Molly, who “definitely plans to upgrade,” is interested in status performance. She knew more than most about grading and prices, confidently explaining that her diamond “is a brilliant cut, a little over two carats, and its color is G.” She told me that she had forgotten the clarity characteristics, but given her self-assured and expansive knowledge about grading, it was odd that she would “forget” such crucial information. Molly hopes to acquire “something around three or four carats in an emerald or radiant cut. . . . It’s like a princess cut only better.”

Now, the strategic use of synthetic or imitation diamonds is, in some cases, a successful iconic ploy; the appearance so resembles a diamond as to be taken for the real McCoy. Given Molly’s aficionado-like attitude toward diamonds, I was surprised to hear her say that “in up-grading, you know, I would take Moissanite instead. It is man-made but nobody can tell and it’s a third of the price so to me that’s fine and I’d rather have

a big Moissanite than this smaller real one.” Molly imagines that in terms of effect, Moissanite is, for all intents and purposes, identical to diamond on the basis of what others think they are seeing. The performative value of diamond and Moissanite are one and the same.

Molly’s attitude here speaks to the nonessentiality of diamonds’ meaning—meaning comes from us rather than from our things. For her, big diamonds, whether real or simulated, satisfy her aims. While deftly sidestepping questions that dealt directly with why she wanted a larger stone and what she hoped wearing big diamonds would say about her to others, she explained that she “feels good” when she wears diamonds: “I truly appreciate the beauty of the diamond, more so than other people. They make me feel very special, very feminine and powerful.” The stones have a palpable impact on the way she experiences herself. In the midst of exploring her subjective experience, she changed the topic to branded stones, but her message was the same:

Have you heard of all the branded stones? Like the Yehuda diamond?² They can actually laser a signature on there. But to me this is just a waste of money because no one else can see the brand—if it showed, I might feel differently, but you have to have a loupe to see it, so who’s even going to know?

I pressed her to say why she cared, but she would only say, “Well, bigger is better.” This exact phrase actually appears on Yehuda advertisements.

Molly is explicitly concerned with the interpretations of others in addition to the feelings she enjoys while wearing diamonds or their look-alikes. Not everyone shares this open-mindedness—one’s own knowledge of quality may be paramount over others’ impressions. Ahmed said, “Even if I were to buy a cheap diamond that looked the same (as a quality, expensive one), if I knew that it was somehow inferior, then, I would not want that.” For him, the consequences of wearing a cheap stone or a fake one are different from those of wearing an expensive, high-quality stone; they are not “the same” as they are

for Molly, and therefore the performative effects are different. Ahmed's felicity conditions have to do with what he believes about the quality of the stone; for him to feel good about wearing it, he needs to know that it is "the best," whereas for Molly, the way the stone appears to others is what matters: "I mean people can tell if you are wearing low-quality, cheap zircs, but not with the good Moissanite." Her easy use of slang such as "zircs"—for cubic zirconia—belies a certain level of comfort with looking at, evaluating, and talking about diamonds and their simulants that most people do not have.

People had varied feelings about simulants—fakes. Some worried about aesthetics (for example, too much "sparkle") or feeling disingenuous or ashamed to be engaged in deception. People were divided about whether they would consider wearing a fake or inexpensive stone. Shannon, in her late twenties, told me that her parents don't have a lot of money and that when they got married her father could not afford a diamond, but "last Christmas my mom opened her gift from him"—and then, in an preemptive defense, she interrupted herself:

I mean, I have never seen my mom act like this; she is really the most gracious and polite woman you will ever meet. But anyway, so she opened the present and there was a diamond ring and she took one look at it and handed it back over to my father and said, "This is fake." And that was the end of it. I don't know how she knew, maybe the size, but she didn't want it and was not about to take it. So anyway, he finally did on their last anniversary give her a real one. It's small, but real.

Besides the fact that her father may have been trying to trick his wife, the ability of a stone to carry appropriate meaning hinged on its honest-to-goodness authenticity.

The relative construction of "authenticity" is highlighted by the story of Sandra and her husband, Ron, both magazine editors whom I met at a dinner party. Ron had given Sandra a "paste" (glass) diamond when they were engaged. Many years later, he confiscated it when she took it off to

work in the garden one day, had the paste replaced with a diamond, and gave it to her again. She was very pleased that he had done this for her, but told me while he was away from the table, “in strictest confidence,” that she didn’t really care if the diamond was real or fake: “To me, the only thing that matters is that it is from his heart.” For Sandra, the paste is as “authentic” as the real.

Related to the success of declaration is the person to whom a declaration is being made, which reminds us that, as Peirce points out, a sign means something to someone, leaving the door open for alterity and contingency. Some men, concerned with the way others might perceive them, argued that even though their girlfriends claimed not to have any preference about size, they wouldn’t buy a small gem because it would reflect badly upon them. I heard many men saying things like, “I don’t want anyone to think I’m cheap” or “You have to go for something that is big enough so people don’t think I am a cheap guy but not so big as to be over the top.” These statements reflect the way men imagine others will read diamonds, rather than the way they themselves see them, let alone the way others actually do read them, which in some ways is one of the most salient cornerstones of outwardly directed performance.

But will others even notice? Jenny believes diamonds are popular primarily for aesthetic reasons, which complicates their use by men as a status claim. She elaborated that diamonds are

so popular because they are not colored and so they go with everything—they are the most versatile fashion accessory and I guess that they have some status but that is really more important for the guy who is like, “See what I got for my wife.” But I don’t think that women care. Men are the ones who really think about it but it’s weird because they don’t ever notice other people’s diamonds.

So the conspicuous consumption of a large “real” diamond can be simultaneously a claim and a demonstration of status and wealth.

The Contractual: I Promise

Signs are employed in contractual performances. In Austin's model, "I'll bet you five dollars that the Tarheels take the Devils," is a contractual illocution resulting in a relationship with contingencies and obligations. Some see diamonds as part of a contract, for example, as a promise of sexual availability. The following excerpt from my interview with Stephanie shows how diamonds can be perceived as a contract:

I mean there are all those symbolic associations like trust and love and stuff but to me when a man gives a woman a diamond it is like he is making a promise to hold up his end of the bargain, a bargain that takes place on several levels—on the one hand if there is a family involved then it is the man's role to be both a provider on a material basis and also to be secure and committed and so it's about money and other material provisions, but even more than that he is promising his presence, his interested presence, his protective presence, and that he will be there to protect the vulnerable family unit. He promises to create a situation in which the mother can devote herself to the care of the children and so to me this is all gelled in the diamond. The diamond is an example of his ability and willingness to be a good provider.

A woman, in accepting the promise-as-diamond, is responsible "for being nurturing and supportive and honoring what the man is giving up, namely, his freedom." While admitting that in having such a thing, there is an "aura of conservative-ness," and that she is conflicted by the guilt she feels when confronted with the realities of diamond production, which "siphons off some of the pleasure," Kristen's interpretation is nuanced and personalized, the result of protracted conversations between her and her husband.

Into the Past

I met Liza, an articulate, artistic woman in her thirties, at a coffee shop for a formal interview. In discussing how her family thinks about jewelry

handed down from her grandparents, she explained how they are used as props on a stage or cairns on a path. Props suggest, authenticate, or identify a setting. A cairn is a pile of stones heaped up, a pyramid of twigs, perhaps a specially tied frond, that is used as a landmark meant to catch your attention and mark a particular spot; hikers leave cairns at places where they change directions, or a cairn may be left to identify a site at which something can be seen or found. Diamonds as cairns direct one's attention toward memories, or imaginaries, and then act as props within those very landscapes. Objects can literally set the stage for stories because they are attached to memories or fantasies. We use them to convey a particular stance, mood, or spirit. Our consciousness can be transported, projected back into the past, or the past may be "brought forward" to the present when we're confronted with these meaningful things.

The following excerpt is about a collection of jewelry that belongs to Liza's family, currently in the possession of her aunt Mariana. We had been discussing "bling," the "deplorable" use of diamonds for self-promotion by rappers, and the social responsibilities that accompany wealth. Liza used the term "prop" to describe how diamonds help set a mood for others:

Talking about all of this, it all makes me think about my Aunt Mariana. She is, and has been for as long as I can remember, so consumed by the diamond jewelry that is in our family. My father's family once had a good deal of money—now they don't, but they did before, and the last pieces to go are always the jewelry and the silver—and why? Because she hangs onto her ideals and memories through them and she doesn't want to let go. I have watched how Mariana has clinged [sic] to those diamonds, like with her life. Like she possesses them and now actually they possess her. She is literally out of her mind. And that has given me such a different view on diamonds than I otherwise would have had. I would rather be happy and be with my husband and my friends and family and have good relationships than have some diamond if it came down to that, which in

this case it has. She uses them to create a fantasy world, she clings to every remnant of the past through those things. And she and all her siblings, they don't even talk over it.

And I think for her it is all about being owed something. Maybe by birthright, but she won't even share with her brothers and sister! I mean people do have a responsibility when they have money, to look after their neighbors and also to be careful with that money so that their children can benefit from it. But Mariana has never had any responsibility in that way, she has frittered away everything, you know, except for the diamonds, and she is not even sharing that. Like the hip-hop community putting diamonds in their teeth is absurd, especially, you know, knowing where they came from, it's all so selfish and irresponsible, why don't they use that money for people who really don't have anything?

But Mariana, she is addicted to diamonds, some people actually get addicted to them, and it's like the diamonds are her greatest happiness and getting a new one is the only thing that she looks forward to. Because she has run off all her brothers and sisters over them so there is no family happiness, really, to speak of.

And she will hang onto them at any cost. And I have thought about this a lot. You see, to her it represents what she once had, and what she could have had, what she should have had, and she really did have it in some ways—I mean the family had more money than anyone else in town—so she had that feeling of status and importance and security, so it's like living in the past. And she has ironically lost the irreplaceable things like her family over these things, but she, well, she did kind of ruin her life. Her mother died when she was very young, and granddaddy remarried this woman that frankly wasn't very nurturing. And so Mariana, she got in with a wild crowd, and was being rebellious, and got pregnant, and granddaddy wanted to send her to a convent in Europe to have the baby and put it up for adoption, but she wouldn't have any of that. And so she eloped when she was sixteen with Tim, this redneck, and she stayed with him for a long time. Too long. And she even went to college but she was the only one to graduate that already had kids.

So she was more nontraditional in those days but then she started clinging—I don't know when this happened—but anyway there she is—these diamonds are part of a past that is partly true, I mean they are like characters in her memory, but she has built them up in her mind so that they are props in this fantasy that she has about what could have been, what the possibilities were, what she should have been, and things like that. But these are dreams that don't exist in any way. These are false realities and having the diamonds make it all seem real to her. She is willing to give up the here-and-now to keep those diamonds that allow her to live in a fantasy world of I don't know what.

This story exemplifies the extent to which historical and local as well as imaginary factors enter into the signification process, and it underscores the need to theorize commodity performativity at a fine level. Here, diamonds operate like characters in a past; they represent alternative realities and perhaps even have personality. Others perform themselves into scenarios, past, present, and future, taking diamonds as felicitous props with which to “do things” such as become engaged, become an adult, or place themselves into an imagined (better) landscape. But, after all, these events also take place within a social milieu rife with media and production ideologies. Advertising and marketing spectacles inform personal dramas that unfurl in shared society as well as in fantasy. The unique nature of personal meanings, colored by experience and imagination, participates both with and against discourse centering on romance, glamour, and wealth.

Into the Future and Other Imaginary Spaces

In the same way that diamonds serve as props to support imagined or remembered pasts, people use them to launch projections of themselves into the future or spatially distant places. I was talking with Mary Sue in her Brooklyn office when she introduced her inherited diamonds—she acquired several large diamonds from her mother—and, thinking about

them, slowly conjured them up. When she described what her mind's eye saw, she told me of their presence in a cardboard box along with other valuable jewelry that she doesn't like to wear. As she was talking, we were both transported to her apartment, to the top of her dark closet, inside a box lying just under a pile of sweaters and other wintry clothes, to an unassuming "cardboard crypt" holding several loose stones. She describes the stones in as much detail as she can revive. The stones contain, she explains tentatively, emotions they absorbed from her mother. She rehearsed the memory of their close, loving relationship and her mother's untimely death, and then spoke about the future, when she will pass them on to her nephews.

Because the diamonds have for Mary Sue "absorbed emotional content from the wearer," these particular diamonds operate legitimately (feliculously) in this setting. Meaning is generated indexically in space where familial relationships are remembered, reenacted, and performed. Passing these objects to her nephews will "do things," namely, reinforce kinship between her nephews and her mother, and between herself and her nephews' fiancées. These diamonds provoke memories of the past and hopes for the future, whose content emerges in concert with, but is far from determined by, marketing campaigns. Mary Sue recognizes the association of diamonds with glamour, and that they can be used to legitimize a proposal, but for her, they first and foremost provide a link to her mother; they are a means by which to underscore existing relations and participate in the formation of new ones. Because she believes that they absorb emotions from the wearer, these particular stones, and no other, are the authentic repositories of memory and enactors of kinship. The authenticity of the stone, as she defines it, is a felicity condition allowing the stone to act performatively.

Shifting Performances

Diamonds operate in imaginaries of future generations, as glamorous accessories or as rainy-day savings accounts, but these imaginaries are

dynamic: they respond to changing circumstance. Narratives of acquisition and dispossession are negotiated, renegotiated, and then rehearsed as visions of the future become honed, or transform, over time. For example, during a casual conversation with Valerie, she told me that her engagement stone was reset in a necklace when she divorced; now it's a fashion accessory rather than a performance of marital commitment.

In another example of the way meaning changes with circumstances, a pair of large diamond earrings, a former souvenir of Renee's marriage to her ex-husband, Howard, has been aestheticized. The diamonds' former significance has given way to one revolving around looking special and fashionable:

I reset the diamonds in a ring with a sapphire and I wear it to parties and on other dressy occasions. Howard always hated to get dressed up and do anything social, so now I use this diamond when I want to look special. You see, I had a friend who was wearing a sapphire and diamond combination—now, hers were huge and the sapphire was about as big as my head, and mine is much smaller—but I love the colors together and I wear it a lot. It goes with a lot of things and it always looks nice and crisp.

It's through the possession, display, and imputation of meaning—in response to the change of circumstance upon specific commodities—that people like Renee successfully perform themselves into the play of today's, yesterday's, or tomorrow's.

Foundational Status

As a paradigm for examining the role of material culture in social relationships, a linguistic model such as that outlined by Austin can be augmented by considering the individual as a producer of meaning. Austin explores language as a consequence-generating phenomenon, but the model doesn't really problematize the mechanics of meaning. Identifying the production of meaning as emergent from individual agents who

interact with but are not wholly determined by known social codes, as Barbara Johnstone (2001) has done, manages to capture both idiosyncrasy and convention in language use. Consumption is similarly idiosyncratic and conventional. Meaning production cannot be predicted by reference to at-large social codes, nor to people's identification with categories such as race, class, gender, or ethnicity, although ideas and commentary about these categories (which are sometimes quite sharp) are certainly implicated.

By taking the individual as the locus of investigation and allowing for subjectivity, ambiguity, and negotiation in the performance of, for instance, gender or kinship rather than in the construction or reflection of it, we maintain a space for the impact of knowledge, memory, and agency on consumption activities. Performative consumption takes place within individuated circumstance. It means calling for a reversal from theory that starts with the society or group and then arrives at the individual to one that gives foundational status to the individual and individual differences (Hymes 1979).

Looking at daily activity from a more rarified perspective, Michel de Certeau, using a metaphor of wandering the city, posits that individual practices are private meanderings within an overarching structure that provides a matrix, but does not determine its subjects' pathways or experience. While de Certeau casts the individual as creative and agentive, this individual creativity is not productive. Analysis of consumer narratives in this chapter suggests that individual actors generate performances that are both productive and creative. Paying attention to the way people think of signs as productive, as performative, as "doing things," helps us understand how material culture is used to exert change or to create circumstances.