INTRODUCTION: LITTLE ROCKS

A rock!!! It’s just a rock, OK? So, I mean, what’s it all about anyway?
—Tom, diamond consumer

In one sense, diamonds are just little rocks. But they are extraordinary rocks, jam-packed with value and significance. This book explores what diamonds mean, how those meanings come about, and what our interactions with these stones can tell us about ourselves and our relationships with material culture, especially mass-marketed, mass-produced, and mass-consumed commodities. Examining the way people relate to diamonds, we gain insight into the way we make sense of all kinds of commodified goods, the kinds of feelings and even self-understandings they evoke, and the way cultural contexts—like advertising strategies and historical narratives—influence our engagement with ordinary objects.

Like many other commodities, diamonds are instantly recognizable to most Americans, especially the round “brilliant” cut. Even the smallest stones can be cut with fifty-eight facets, causing light to bounce around inside the stone, which is itself clear, but not transparent. It attracts the eye, but does not allow the gaze to penetrate. In many ways, the qualities of a cut stone mirror the diamond as a cultural artifact. The industry is infamously opaque, while its goods are carefully manicured and marketed. And like a brilliant cut with its many facets, diamonds are
polyvalent, which means that they carry many meanings: gemological, monetary, sentimental, and geological, just to name a few.

Their polyvalence makes diamonds objects of fascination. But what are they, anyway? Just bits of compressed carbon? On the one hand, the industry promotes evaluating diamonds based on the “4 Cs”—clarity, cut, color, and caratage (weight)—which help determine a diamond’s grade, and ultimately its price. Marketing campaigns attach notions of love, status, and romance to them. And diamonds really are exceptional minerals, holding special interest for students of geology. They are hard to find and difficult to mine. But rare as they are thought to be, diamonds are everywhere (Zapata 1998). And everyone who has a diamond has a story to tell about it. These stories reveal what we do with these stones, but, more importantly, they suggest how we create value, meaning, and identity through our interactions with what we might call “stuff” (see Miller 2009a; see also Miller 2005).

Consider an excerpt from Carla’s story (told in more detail in chapter 6). When she first married Gene, she refused to wear a diamond. Then her Aunt Margaret gave her a small but well-shaped stone. Because it was
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a gift from a family member, Carla felt obliged to wear it, explaining that it alerts other men that she is married and stops them from hitting on her (“usually”) but that at first she was not at all interested in even having a diamond, much less one that she did not find visually appealing. She held the stone up for inspection, moving her hand slightly from side to side in a gesture meant to playfully mock television ads featuring engagement rings. We both laughed, then continued the interview.

Diamond stories, invoking kinship, gender, aesthetics, and desire, as in this excerpt, develop within a complex cultural landscape. Idiosyncrasy, agency, and creativity shape these narratives, which in turn explain, interpret, and ultimately make social worlds happen. Our interactions with things, such as commodities, simultaneously reflect and reshape our experience. This “social work” of diamonds constitutes a pragmatic dimension of consumption (see Dant 1999).

We live with and through things that become meaningful because of our interactions with them, but how do people go about making meaning? In what ways are diamonds good examples of material culture in general? How do people who are positioned within a globalized political economy and a compelling universe of advertising interact locally with these polished rocks? How are those rocks transformed into something unique? What can we learn from an analysis of consumers’ stories about the production of identity, creation of kinship, and challenges to the status quo? How does material culture help actualize selves and social relationships?

To answer these questions, this book draws on the work of the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914). While the full Peircian semiotic project is extremely complex in both its content and mission, I hope to demonstrate how one apparatus of the Peircian theoretical toolbox, what is known as the Second Trichotomy (icon-index-symbol), can be fruitfully employed in the study of material culture in general, and applied in the case of diamond consumption in particular. Peirce noted that the Second Trichotomy was the one he used most frequently, and declared that it had the greatest impact on
social analysis (Parmentier 2009, 143). In this study, using data collected during fieldwork with industry insiders and consumers in New York City, I explicate how the Second Trichotomy can be mobilized to illuminate how people create meaning. To contextualize these narratives within the history of diamond production, I provide a description of contemporary industry dynamics, an ethnographic report on a grading school, and an exploration of diamond marketing archives. This larger context surrounds us, influencing the semiotic ideologies we use, that is to say, what kinds of signs we take things to be.

My intention is not to provide a definitive analysis of the diamond as a cultural artifact, nor to illuminate a typology of signs, but rather to reflect upon and critique the way the consumer is constructed in social theory. This approach starts with an assumption that similar cultural signs, such as diamonds, from disparate times and places—and even those from the same place, or held by the one individual at different times—may not have consistent cultural meanings (see Parmentier 2009, 153). I take the individual as the locus of investigation rather than starting with the group, which illuminates how agency, often in the form of creativity or resistance, resides in ordinary acts of consumption. Many anthropological studies of consumption assume that consumers’ ideas about commodities are in some way reducible to the aims of advertisers or to the ideologies on which advertisers draw. By beginning with consumers’ agentive acts and then critically examining the semiotic mechanics behind individual variation, my approach traces and situates the unpredictable process of identity formation within a powerful matrix of historical and cultural discourse.

Identifying different modes of semiosis (meaning making) observed in diamond stories allows me to carve out a space for idiosyncratic meaning making and to argue that consumers use diamonds as a cultural resource to “do” things, by developing their own interpretations as an exertion of agency in an ad-burdened universe—rather than simply imbibing corporate ideologies. We are thus invited to revisit the way we identify, think about, and treat difference, agency, and the politics of consuming
material goods. This book is, therefore, in dialogue with (a) semiotic anthropology, particularly those studies that use Peircian sign theory for ethnographic research, attend to individual differences (best exemplified by Johnstone [2000]), or interrogate meaning-making practices (such as work by Vincent Crapanzano [2001] and Webb Keane [2003]); (b) consumption theory, especially with regard to the use of Saussurean theories of meaning that have guided the study of commodities; and (c) research on material culture concerning production, sensuality, and use.

Semiotic Anthropology: Making Sense of Signs

In her review of semiotic anthropology, Elizabeth Mertz (2007) takes up the shifts and themes characterizing the field since the publication of *Man’s Glassy Essence* (1984), in which Milton Singer calls upon scholars to use a Peircian lens to integrate social context into the anthropological analysis of meaning. Mertz’s review is illuminating in its coverage of the benefits of this strategy, but there is no section devoted to reviewing the study of material culture, and of the more than one hundred references, there are only a handful showing how one might use Peircian theory to look at meaningful things. Interestingly, not one deals with consumer semiosis.

Most of the material front and center in semiotic anthropology is theoretical, and often presented in ways that are frustratingly hard to penetrate. When it is ethnographic, it usually focuses on linguistic encounters or language itself (or both). Much of this work builds upon linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein’s (1979, 1995) analyses that account for pragmatic and indexical aspects of both language and culture. His theoretical work has served as a foundation for much fine-grained ethnographic research on language acquisition, socialization, and identity production.

As Mertz (2007) points out, emerging concerns with power, history, practice, and agency in anthropological theory have also shown up in semiotic paradigms that question the limits of creativity within linguistic structures and the exertion of agency within cultural contexts. What
Silverstein calls the meta-pragmatic structure of language—that is, the description of what language does, or is believed to do, not just as speech but also as action—is just one of the latest advances in the area of semiotic linguistics.

But semiotic lenses contain powerful tools that can brought to bear in anthropological studies of all kinds of material culture (Kockelman 2006), from Walbiri graphics (Munn 1962) to real estate signs (Gottdeiner 1995) to olive oil (Meneley 2008) to the practice of archaeology itself (Preucel 2010). For example, Carol Hendrickson’s *Weaving Identities: Construction of Dress and Self in a Highland Guatemala Town* (1995) draws on a Peircian typology of the icon to analyze images of Guatemalan weavers, exploring the space between the image and its purported object of representation in her critique of capitalist interests. A little further afield, Paja Faudree (2012) argues that approaching language-music “semiotically will promote ... holism in anthropological practice if coupled to the joint effort of attending to textuality while decentering its primacy” (519). And Galina Lindquist (2001) uses a Peircian semiotic to show that New Age Russian healing is a matter of harnessing the iconic and indexical features of diagnosis. But with regard to objects, one can look beyond *sign types* (index, icon, etc.) to *semiotic ideologies*. In the case of diamonds, we will be looking at both sign types and people’s expectations for how diamonds can or should work as vehicles of meaning—their semiotic ideologies, or meta-pragmatic structures, if you will.

There are many kinds of signs: conventional, indexical, imagistic, symptomatic, diagrammatic, metaphoric, poetic, onomatopoeic, and so forth. Each works according to its own logic, and exploring the range of sign types in ethnographic (Daniel 1984, 1996; Riggins 1994; Rumsey 1990) or even literary material (Fischer and Nänny 2001) reveals different aspects of semiosis. People make, respond to, and understand their surroundings through signs like words, visual representations, and objects. Logos are signs. Photos are signs. Cars are signs. And diamonds are signs too. Examining diamonds as signs through personal stories
illuminates the complexities of sign play, showing the extent to which basic semiotic activities can be highly creative.

In celebrating the creative aspect of human language, Chomsky noted that the majority of lengthy utterances are original and unique. This is partly because people play with the rules and not just the pieces, to draw on the Saussurean metaphor of language as a game of chess. Linguistic theories based on the work of Saussure focus on the symbolic elements of language, but cannot easily account for communication that bends the rules, subverting or exceeding standard codes of meaning. And, as Paul Kockelman (2006) points out, “while most Saussurean categories can be understood in terms of Peirce's categories ([semiology] may be framed in terms of semiotics), the converse is not true. . . . Saussure's theory has fewer dimensions than the processes it seeks to theorize” (83–84). Identifying these other processes helps us to understand creativity in the face of an encompassing social milieu that is powered by the requirements of advanced capitalism, including some rather convoluted consumption practices.

Consumption

There has been a tremendous amount of work done on contemporary consumption by scholars across many disciplines. Of especial utility to consumer studies has been work connecting goods to identity, global exchange and circulation, inequality, value, agency, capitalism, branding. Much of this work advances Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1984) to detail how we not only produce but are in a sense *produced by* the commodities with which we interact.

To interrogate the conditions of consumption, this study is launched from lines of inquiry that focus on production (Baudrillard 1975; Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994), marketing (Applbaum 1998; Chaudhuri 2001; Davila 2001; Nixon 2003; Williams 1980; Williamson 1978), identity (Friedman 1994; Lunt and Livingstone 1992; Qureshi and Moore 1999), and even shopping (Fiske 1994; Lehtonen 1999; Miller 1998, 2001).
Heavily indebted to the “culture as text” analogy articulated by Clifford Geertz (1977), most of this literature (wittingly or unwittingly) treats commodities as language-like units that refer to codified meanings, as Saussure suggested. People certainly do interpret diamonds in this way (where diamonds mean romance or glamour), but this is only part of the story. But because people use material culture in ways that exceed Saussurean semiology, I decided to work with the broader Peircian theoretical project as a starting point. What I most appreciate about using this approach is that it opens up more space for taking seriously individual responses to history and discourse from which broader insights about creative agency might be gleaned.

Making Sense of Material Culture

The field of material culture studies is a highly interdisciplinary endeavor that addresses empirical and theoretical questions related to the roles that things play within social organization and in subjective experience. Material culture represents an extremely important but oddly underexamined area of study, perhaps because, as many have pointed out, the ubiquity of material culture makes it easy to overlook. Since most commodities are also at least partly material, the field of material culture studies intersects in significant ways with research on consumption. This book is in dialogue with scholars of material culture whose work is constantly reconfiguring our understandings of subject/object relations, practices of acquisition and divestment, and processes of interpretation, resistance, and alienation with regard to the commodity worlds we inhabit.

The history of material culture scholarship is grounded in nineteenthcentury museum work, archaeology, exhibition practices, colonialism, and consumerism (Buchli 2002). Methods of anthropological research have been revised since then, the notion of “culture” has undergone almost fatal critique, and the use of structuralist, and even
poststructuralist, theory to explicate nonlinguistic “texts” has become strained. Now, the “material turn” has generated new questions about the nature, function, and study of materiality (Hicks and Baudry 2010; Ingold 2012). I have been inspired by work along these lines that explores materiality through the close study of particular objects, revealing how people live with material culture in surprising ways (Chin 2001; Myers 2002; Scheld 2003).

One research strategy for people-object relations is to start with broadcasted images and sociological identity categories, rather than individual voices; people do sometimes read material culture in ways predicated on standard assumptions about categories of difference, especially class and gender. But, even the term “material culture” itself suggests a paradox, simultaneously pointing to physicality, which can be observed and understood through use of the hard sciences along with historical, political, and economic analyses; and meaning, which can be studied through anthropological, sociological, psychological, philosophical, and even literary lenses. In this vein, studies of material culture can be classed as “hard” or “soft” (Prown 1996; see also Hoskins 1998). “Hard” studies, such as Robert Hazen’s (1999) history of synthetic diamonds, focus on an object’s material configuration, from observable qualities, such as color and texture, down to molecular arrangements. “Soft” approaches begin with an investigation of implicit and explicit cultural meanings reported from a subjective position, like Mukulika Banerjee and Daniel Miller’s (2008) analysis of the relationship between women and their saris.

Combining a “hard” with a “soft” approach to diamonds, as Andrew Walsh (2004) has done in his work with Malagasy sapphire producers, or as Brian Brazeal (2012) accomplished in his visual ethnography of the Indian emerald trade, this book focuses on the subjective consumption end of the commodity chain. Consumers’ stories refract—sometimes only tacitly, sometimes with full-fledged critiques—fascinating histories (Arkansas Diamond Company 1908; Birch and Norhthrop 1899; Carstens
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2001; Joris 1986; Kanfer 1993; Lenzen 1970; Oppenheimer 2002; Worger 1987); cultural significances highly mediated by advertising (Epstein 1982a, 1982b; Hay 2004; Westwood 2002); and material presented in a blizzard of marketing and pop culture books and movies (Fleming 1956, 1957; Zoellner 2006; Zwick 2006).

A discursive universe, including advertising, has established a narrative that ties diamonds to romance and glamour, but when I began conducting interviews, I was surprised by the high degree of thematic and structural variation within consumers’ stories. My semiotic analysis, accomplished by coding each vignette, showed that these stones are routinely interpreted over and above, alongside, or sometimes against the normative themes that are promoted in ads and historical accounts; that diamonds are used in the service of many kinds of personal and even political projects related to identity production, poesy, and the management of social others; and that people’s expectations for how diamonds should work for others as vehicles of meaning varies widely.

So ads have not been entirely successful on a meta-pragmatic level: marketing has not been able to establish a privileged semiotic ideology by which consumers always interpret diamonds as symbols referring to the values that marketers promote. It does, however, provide consumers with a framework for thinking about how other people, especially strangers, are using these things as symbols. This projection of meaning is further explained by the contrast between the way we understand a particular object (our own diamond) and the way we understand a more generic one; in a phenomenon known as a “token-type distinction,” we sometimes value tokens (a specific diamond) differently from the ways in which we think about a type (diamonds in general). The way an object is ushered into token-hood from type-hood has to do with experience, use, memory, and belief about a particular object, for example, its scarcity (Falls 2008).

While diamonds are often described as scarce, the contemporary global diamond industry extracts over 120,000,000 carats of rough diamonds annually, although at least 70 percent is “bort,” poor-quality
stones used for industrial purposes. Still, sale of the remaining gem-quality goods exceeds $72 billion every year. From the 1880s through the 1990s, most “rough”—unpolished diamonds—moved through a pipeline controlled by De Beers Consolidated Mines. De Beers’s first-quarter production of 2012 was reported to be over six million carats, with rough sales in the first half of the year estimated at an astonishing $2.83 billion (Krawitz 2012).

While independent rough dealers began mounting real challenges to De Beers’s long-held monopoly in the 1990s, the company remains the most important industry player. De Beers is especially active as a leader in sales vocabulary, in marketing strategies—such as the “right-hand ring” campaign—and in designing the Kimberley Process (KP), an international certification system that has helped to reduce the number of “blood diamonds” (diamonds being traded outside of the licit pipeline for weapons used in civil conflict), which have historically made up somewhere between 3 and 20 percent of the trade (see Falls 2011).

Because diamond has a high per-carat value and is easily smuggled, a lively black market has thrived since even before the formation of the modern industry, which is marked by the 1867 discovery of diamonds in South Africa. Early on, these African gems were absorbed by European elites, but the Great Depression left global sales in a slump. Demand was rejuvenated in 1947 when De Beers hired the advertising giant N. W. Ayer to develop an American middle-class market for diamonds, and copywriter Frances Gerety coined the “A Diamond Is Forever” tagline. The plan worked: about 90 percent of American women own at least one diamond, and most own multiple diamonds; the American market absorbs most of the polished goods sold every year on the global market—its $27 billion revenue is twice that of the number two market (China) and three times that of the third largest (India) (Bain 2012b). The heart of the U.S. market is New York City’s “Diamond Row,” located on Forty-seventh Street between Fifth and Sixth avenues, just a few blocks south of Rockefeller Center and close to the high-end stores of Fifty-seventh Street and Fifth Avenue. This spot is where my research began.
Diamond Row

Most diamonds sold in the United States come through the New York market—also called the “bourse,” or “exchange”—inside the Diamond Dealers Club (DDC). In 2004, I visited with a DDC officer who gave me a tour of the trading floor, where packets of polished stones are bought and sold. “You’re not taping this, are ya?” he asked me, in a room of the utterly nondescript, high-security building, underscoring the covert nature of diamond trading. Not only is Diamond Row home to the DDC, but the entire block—all the storefronts and all the office space above
them—is occupied by some type of diamond operation. Walking there, you will see hundreds of stores selling loose stones and jewelry at all price levels. Right around the corner, luxury retailers like Harry Winston, Tiffany and Co., and Movado sell their signature wares.

The Gemological Institute of America (GIA) is also located on Diamond Row. A final authority on polished grading and identification, GIA maintains the 4 Cs and is an essential partner in the production of value. Grading diamonds based on the 4 Cs is an elaborate affair, which requires years of training and experience to do well. The 4 Cs are sometimes accompanied by a fifth C—a certificate, or map, issued by the Gemological Institute of America detailing every relevant characteristic of an individual stone, and conferring additional value. This is why jewelry is sometimes advertised as “GIA Certified!” But certification is not just a marketing ploy. Although GIA does not set prices, the characteristics graders identify on these certificates help determine final costs. And minute discrepancies can be expressed in significant monetary differences. Price tags up and down Forty-seventh Street, and all over the world for that matter, are legislated and legitimized by this system.

GIA also trains students. When I enrolled in their Diamond Grading Course as part of my fieldwork, I met retailers and other industry employees, learned how polished diamonds are produced, and was of course taught the fundamentals of grading. I learned business jargon and how to recognize “features” and “inclusions,” like black spots, cracks, or chips. Instructors showed me how to use a loupe (a small magnifying glass), a pointer, a gem microscope, master stones, and special lights to plot characteristics on maps. I was introduced to grading “fancy” cuts (nonround shapes such as marquise, oval, or pear), colored stones (diamonds come in virtually every color of the rainbow), and techniques for identifying diamond simulants such as cubic zirconia and Moissanite. And while there is a subjective aspect to grading, after practicing on hundreds of examples, I was able to create basic maps of simple stones comparable to those produced by specialists. Having the ability to discuss
the particulars of grading was extremely useful in my work with both retailers and consumers.

As an institution dedicated to supporting industry interests, GIA also offers instruction in marketing and sales. My teachers frequently outlined the language retailers should use. For example, one instructor told us as he held up a tiny gem, “This one is junk, but to the customer, you know, ‘Every diamond is beautiful!’” I guess everyone thought this was pretty funny because it was followed by a hearty round of laughter, but the humor hints at the fragility of a deeply constructed system.

Browsing along Forty-seventh Street, in the old diamond district at Bowery and Canal streets, and in high-end stores like Harry Winston, estate merchants such as ABC, or discount stores like Zales, I routinely heard salespeople echoing ideas advanced at GIA, coaching customers in how to look at these objects—although, as one downtown retailer named Mandy told me, nowadays people come in knowing more about what they want: “Women are smarter about these things now. It used to be that nobody knew that much. Just yesterday a guy came in here with his girlfriend and she had done all the research, I mean you can get this information online now, and she knew exactly what cut and size and so forth.” When people arrive having already accepted the grading system, Mandy and other retailers are relieved of doing the “education” that legitimizes different prices charged for goods that look identical to the untrained eye.

Consumer education at the counter is buttressed by extensive ad campaigns. One archive in the Special Collections Library at Duke University is dedicated to De Beers’s marketing history, and contains an extensive record that plainly tracks the “A Diamond Is Forever” campaign with its sustained repetition of themes related to scarcity, glamour, and romance. Even though the people I talked with joked constantly about taglines like “diamonds are a girl's best friend,” they were not constrained by grading or marketing discourse when it came to telling their own diamond stories. Understanding these stories requires celebrating the uniqueness of each person while taking cultural tropes seriously. Doing
so exposes how we use these tiny rocks—just like we use other kinds of commodities—to do the important work of being in the world. It is through our interactions with material culture, such as diamonds, that we forge and texturize our everyday experience.

While scholarship on both material culture and the experience of the everyday is becoming more prevalent in the social sciences, this book offers a somewhat unusual ethnography because while the people I worked with are linked by their interaction with a single kind of good, they do not make up a community per se. I did not decipher what, if any, characteristics were present among all the people I interviewed, most of whom do not know one another. Instead, I examined the mechanics of interpretation through an analysis of more than forty interviews with people I found using “snowball sampling,” asking friends and acquaintances to put me in contact with others in their social network and in turn asking them to introduce me to others. Some people I already knew, and others I met in casual settings, at parties or other social gatherings, who after hearing about my research said, “I'd love to be interviewed” or “Oh, I have story for you—” and launched into a detailed anecdote, or told me, “You should really talk to . . .” (offering to introduce me). I worked with both women and men, mostly white women, between the ages of twenty-five and forty, who fell into the gross category of the educated middle-class (as do I). This is demographic data I surmised, both visually and on the basis of what people said, directly and indirectly, about themselves. The group represents the target market for advertising; my findings about the ways their meaning making diverges from cultural discourse are therefore all the more suggestive.

The vast majority of my interviews were unstructured and open ended. I nudged people to address certain issues, but allowed them considerable freedom in taking a direction and using a vocabulary all their own. I did not systematically request information about salary, class, age, religion, sexual orientation, marital status, or cost of diamonds, though sometimes these things came up. Instead of
pursuing detailed life histories, I asked for narratives that included circumstances of acquisition, possession, loss, recovery, and plans for future divestment for their diamonds. We talked about how their diamonds are cared for, when they are worn or displayed, how they compare to other things, how those who wear diamonds believe other people read them, and how their stones gathered or lost significance. I sometimes pressed people to pursue trains of thought only parenthetically introduced (and, of course, these parenthetical remarks sometimes turned out to be the most fascinating).

Coding, a method well suited to studies of subjectivity, allowed me to manage the data. Patterns of variables emerged as interviews were coded and then recoded. Complicating the coding process was the fact that interviews are odd social interactions: people are simultaneously indexing who they are and who they think I am; performing identities threaded with ideas about aesthetics, gender, class, and ethnicity; and either creating or disarticulating a power-rife relationship with me (see Crapanzano 1985). I coded data with a sensitivity to meta-level properties (for example, an interviewee who is “telling” me that she feels herself to be cosmopolitan through dismissive statements about suburbanism, while not using any of those particular words), but only insofar as it applied to the way people were placing themselves in the world through their interpretive work. Shelves of scholarly and popular literature covering social, political, and economic facets of the industry (Bergenstock and Maskulka 2001; Du Plessis 1960; Carstens 2001; De Boeck 1998; Dickinson 1965; Harlow et al. 1998; Kanfer 1993; Worger 1987) provided additional variables.

My data was gathered not as an experimental sample to enumerate frequencies but as a pool of narratives analyzed to yield conclusions about the semiosis of material culture. I immediately recognized a bent toward idiosyncrasy, performance, and creativity, and worked to determine how these elements might be explained by means of existing paradigms. It was not an easy fit. A straight political-economy approach misses the imaginative layer of consumption. A celebration of consumer
agency misses the way the issues of race, class, and gender inequality that are obviously part of the context can shape people's interpretive practices. And many consumption theories are predicated upon a “culture-as-language” analogy wherein language is conceptualized as “referential.” Here, linguistic communication is conceived of as an activity that simply denotes and describes the world as it already is. Language is understood as a tool of propositionality, rather than as pragmatic or rhetorical. The variation in meaning making evident within diamond narratives suggests that consuming material culture is better understood as a practice operating beyond the referential model; it is also pragmatic and rhetorical.

The method I lay out to analyze diamond consumption can be used, with some modification, for virtually any commodity, in the service of different theoretical concerns, or to further investigate the claims I will be making here. Ultimately I argue for an approach that begins with understanding commodities as historically and discursively situated but that recognizes creative agency in the cultural work of the everyday. Identifying the tactics people use allows us to rethink assumptions usually taken as starting points in the study of consumerism, and supports renewed attention to the role of creativity in making experience intelligible.

This case study is meant to show how an understanding of culture can be gleaned by examining the sometimes incongruent relationship between shared cultural registers and the beliefs, practices, and values of individuals within it. These incongruencies can be accounted for by emphasizing what Dell Hymes called the “foundational status” of individuals and individual differences from which culture is ultimately abstracted (Hymes 1979), while still considering the contextualizing, and sometimes defining, social worlds in which we operate. In a more speculative vein, I suspect this line of inquiry will eventually provide support for the idea that objects are best conceived as events rather than as persistent things, and that cultural norms—in a manner not unlike the ways in which common sense turns out to be not very common—are weaker than we might have imagined, abstracted as they are from
different streams of experience by subjects who deploy a range of semiotic strategies.

What Do Diamonds Mean?

Diamonds, carbon molecules compressed into regular octahedrons, precede human existence by millions of years, perhaps even hitching a ride to earth on meteorites. Little is known about their first uses, but they are described as early as 300 BCE in written accounts like the *Arthasastra*, an Indian manual for administration and taxation (Harlow 1998). The English word “diamond” first appeared in print around 1310 in Thomas Wright’s “Specimens of Lyric Poetry”: “Ichot a burde in a hour ase beryl so bryht . . . Ase diamaunde the dere in day when he is dyht” (Simpson and Weiner 1989). The association between stars, dew, or frost and diamonds is now well known, as in Jane Taylor’s early-nineteenth-century classic, “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” And they routinely appear as metaphors related to hardness, refractivity, or preciousness:

What precious drops are those
Which silently each other’s track pursue,
Bright as young diamonds in their infant dew?


As the diamond is the crystalline
Revelator of the achromatic white light of Heaven,
So is a perfect poem the crystalline revelation of the
Divine Idea.

— Thomas H. Chivers, Preface to *Eonchs of Ruby* (1851)

Every tooth in a man’s head is more valuable than a diamond.

— Miguel De Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (1605)
“Diamond” is also a shape, a baseball field, a card suit, and a textile stitch. In each case, a resemblance between what is being described, for example, the shape of the baseball field defined by the relationship between the bases, is thought to resemble a diamond crystal. The personal name “Diamond,” means “precious” or “valuable,” and reflects how symbolic meanings advanced in marketing campaigns can be transferred through naming onto a person, in a kind of sympathetic magic.

So the term “diamond” suggests glamour, sex, romance, and wealth to one person; greed, conventionality, suburbanism, and pretention to another. How are these various ideas generated and maintained? How can disparate sources of meaning—history, memory, poetry, metaphor, formal (even geological) characteristics, and production chains, in addition to marketing discourse—be contained under a single rubric? How do these stones act as prisms through which we see ourselves?

Since consumption is an important cultural activity, understanding how experience is mediated by mass-produced, mass-marketed, and mass-consumed material culture in the context of advanced capitalism has become a priority in social theory (see Appadurai 1986; Journal of Material Culture 1996; Miller 1995; Paterson 2005; Schor and Holt 2000; Howes 1996; McCracken 1990; Ritzer 1996), one approach is to think about diamonds alongside similar kinds of goods (though even as commodities, they do have some very special qualities). But there is surprisingly little research focused on revealing practical relationships between consumers and commodities as such relationships are articulated by consumers themselves (see exceptions in Miller 2009a and Chin 2001). As Tim Dant (1996, 2000) has pointed out, this is particularly the case once things have been integrated into everyday lives, which is striking since this is where the meanings of commodities become particularly salient. So, in putting diamonds in the context of consumer capitalism but focusing on subjectivity, this book is a response to Dant’s call to study commodities in their “postacquisition” phase.

Because of their visibility in contemporary society, there are several theories of the commodity, each with its own aims and suppositions,
strengths and contributions. In analyzing the diamond trade—embedded in a tangled web of capitalism and implicated in the reproduction of unequal global and domestic relationships—the most useful theories are those that understand consumption as exemplary of advanced capitalism; that explode categories such as “gift,” “luxury,” and “consumer sovereignty”; and that recognize how indeterminately we absorb messages promoted through marketing. Frankfurt School scholars like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944) and Walter Benjamin (1969), the Cultural Studies approach led by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (1975), and Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein’s (see Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994) commodity chain model all highlight the dynamics of capitalism by linking commodity meanings to exploitative class relations. These scholars show how commodity circuits are related to asymmetrical relationships among the actors within them—including consumer and producer—which is an important first step in establishing how gems accrue value. To explore this context, chapter 1 details the sprawling transnational commodity chain that helps transform lowly rocks into valuable gems.

It takes many years to become a skilled grader, but doing so is fundamental to making gems. Chapter 2 examines how the act of grading choreographs each gem into uniqueness, and thus enhances its market value. Workers doing various jobs in the production process, be they miners, cutters, or retailers, pay particular attention to grading and pricing, but most consumers have a poor grasp of both. The average person cannot distinguish high- versus low-grade, natural versus simulated, fine versus poor, or pricey versus inexpensive diamonds, even with close inspection.

Understanding the history and architecture of production is crucial to appreciating how gems are integrated into larger systems, such as labor networks and political relationships, and how they came to have such a visible presence in the United States. But since the meanings people associate with diamonds may or may not be related to their knowledge of production processes, and because consumers sometimes
introduce ideas that have nothing to do with political economy, an approach that demystifies the commodity by laying bare the realities of production only partially explains what diamonds mean to people “on the ground.” One must also consider how they are acquired and how they are used.

That there are mutually exclusive differences between the gift and the commodity can be traced to Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift* (1922), which explains the social construction of objects, including what they mean, by virtue of their exchange as gift or commodity. This is a false distinction when taken as a binary opposition. Diamonds are special in that they are often received as gifts—but the mere fact that something is acquired as a gift does not necessarily mean that it does not maintain features of a commodity with regard to its history, meaning, social role, and cost. Furthermore, as Dant argues, acquisition by gift or by purchase does not necessarily predict, confer, or constrain meaning, although clearly it can impact interpretation. Looking at exchange and the value of gifted objects as embedded in social relationships, as David Graeber (1996) has done with beads, helps us focus on diamonds in terms of their local trajectories, while remaining open to the possibility of a gift/commodity distinction, a factor that may or may not be relevant to consumers.

Rather than take “gift” versus “commodity” as mutually exclusive categories that determine the role of goods in social relationships, diamonds can be defined by virtue of manufacture and marketability within capitalist production where consumer interpretation is the terminal stage. And although people might see these gems as moving in and out of “commodity-hood”—in and out of a state for which there is a fair cash equivalent—they are clearly produced and consumed within a society in which luxury is valorized (see Kopytoff 1986).

Because diamonds are routinely linked with luxury, and thus with a related binary distinction between want and need, some people told me that diamonds are frivolous expenses that fail to meet any “legitimate” requirement. Echoing these consumer ideologies, discussions about
frivolity are found throughout the sometimes morally charged sociological literature about what counts as “need” as opposed to “want.” But even if we accept an analytic distinction between need and want, and the related association of luxury with desire, are diamonds really luxury goods? They are sold at every price point, from Harry Winston to Walmart. The industry has tried to persuade us that diamonds are essential in the engagement ritual (and the engagement ring market does drive the market), while simultaneously fostering the idea that they are lavish (and thus only for the wealthy). This strategy has been fairly successful, since many view diamonds, paradoxically, as both necessary and luxurious (un-necessary). The delineation of need versus want by consumers, on the other hand, can structure the way people judge one another in terms of conformity or aspiration, especially in relation to class, because they may assume that others have internalized not just the meanings but also the semiotic ideology advanced by marketing.

Clearly drawing on the content of advertising campaigns, many people told me things like “diamonds are for rich people,” and “nothing says money like a diamond.” This is not surprising; we do absorb marketing language and can be mesmerized by what Raymond Williams (1980) called the “magical quality of advertising.” And the De Beers campaign has been extraordinarily magical. Most adults I talked with knew the taglines and frequently remarked upon the scarcity and status value of diamonds promoted by ads. But the degree to which consumers are more deeply ensnared is less obvious. Their stories contained overt claims of sovereignty and resistance, and showed people as independent, calculating, self-actualized agents of their own destiny, even though they are, without question, operating within a social universe fraught with marketing, most of which asserts class consciousness as part of a brand identity.

As branding techniques have become more sophisticated, commodities that are similar on the surface, like Pepsi and Coke, compete to gain value through symbolic loads constituted through
advertising “sign wars” (Goldman and Papson 1991). Purchasing an object may even become a mere alibi for the acquisition of a brand or logo, like the Nike Swoosh; the sign itself arguably is the primary object of purchase. The Forever Mark—a new brand by De Beers in which gems are etched with a logo and unique number—seeks to become a “lovemark,” a brand that “reaches your heart as well as your mind, creating an intimate, emotional connection that you just can’t live without. Ever” (Saatchi & Saatchi 2013). Burning icons onto polished gems with a laser confirms diamonds’ place among other objects subject to the latest techniques of branding. The use of branded gems for social signaling is, however, complicated by the fact that the logo is literally microscopic.

Brand consumption constructs and communicates identity according to characteristics such as generation, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, or race. Commodities express purported membership in identity categories both to known and to unknown others, but few ethnographic studies focus on the subjective aspect of this experience (see Halle 1996 as an excellent exception). Most work in this vein tracks meaning from the top down. Robert Foster (1999), an anthropologist who explores how marketing draws on nationalism, closely reads Coke, Pepsi, and Shell gasoline ads in Papua, New Guinea, and argues that insofar as consuming these products is an everyday experience, consumption is inserted into a “micropolitics of belonging” (263). Here consumption serves as the basis for an imagined national community, and Foster does an excellent job of exploring the mechanisms of branding. But, however compelling his analysis, it would be made even more so had we heard from Coke drinkers themselves. Marketers clearly try to use nationalism as a selling point, but how do the people living in one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse countries in the world interpret this? How do they understand their consumption of soft drinks or gasoline in relation to the nationalism being promoted?
Taking the question of subjective experience into consideration, chapters 3 through 6 track consumer perspectives. I found that the most effective way to accomplish this is through a pointed, thorough semiotic analysis. This treatment requires using some technical terms that I begin introducing here.

Semiotics, as we have seen, is the study of signs. And, following Peirce, a sign is anything that means something to someone. Anything can become a sign. And signs can have multiple meanings. They can be linguistic, gestural, or material. There are various kinds of signs, and each kind functions in its own way. People understand diamonds as at least four kinds of signs: symbolic, motivated, poetic, and performative.

Chapters 3 through 6 each focuses upon one of these modes. Following Peirce’s Second Trichotomy (icon-index-symbol), a symbol is a kind of sign that operates by virtue of convention. That is, we learn to associate a certain meaning with a symbol. We are taught that a red octagon means “Stop!” Or that the word “cat,” or “la gata,” refers to the idea of a furry, whiskered creature that likes to chase mice. With symbols there is no necessary or obvious relationship between the significance (Stop!) and the sign itself (red octagon), so the meaning can be described as unmotivated. Another way to think about this is that the form of the symbol is not intrinsic to, or motivated by, the idea to which it refers. Chapter 3 investigates diamonds as symbols.

For motivated signs—such as icons or indexes—there is a discernible relationship between the form of the sign and what it actually means. Icons operate by resemblance: a street map of the city resembles the urban layout in some ways (though not in all ways, for example, because maps are much smaller than the terrain they depict). A portrait works iconically when it looks like its subject in some important way. Onomatopoeia is an iconic linguistic sign; a loud crash of objects against a wall motivates us to describe it as “Bam!” The word resembles what it means. Indexes, another class of motivated signs, work through causality. A footprint in
the sand means (indexes, or points to the fact) that someone walked here. A weather vane swings north (indexes the fact that the wind is blowing north) because the wind pushed it in that direction. Stories collected in chapter 4 show how diamonds work as icons or indexes.

Linguistic theories based on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, an important linguist and father of the field he called “semiology,” focus on the symbolic elements of language, but cannot easily account for poetic communication that subverts or exceeds standard codes of meaning (see Bally et al. 1986). Special devices such as irony, parody, sarcasm, and ostranenie remain mysterious and underexplained. Ostranenie, literally “making strange,” a term developed by Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky, is a device of defamiliarization, and is yet another lens through which we might understand diamond semiosis (Lemon and Reis 1965). Chapter 5 illustrates how “bling” (big, flashy diamonds in unusual settings that are worn in ways that cut against standards of gender and style promoted in industry ads) works partly as a symbol of glamour or status, but by calling attention to itself and its sign-hood, invites a critical, questioning engagement. Bling is a poetic device that instead of reflecting, or even pretending to reflect, cultural norms has the potential to create new knowledge, ideas, and relationships.

Linguistic studies have continued to augment our understanding of the way culture works even as the study was for a time hobbled by inattention to some of the nonsymbolic aspects of language (such as icons, indexes, and poetics). Linguistic anthropologists such as Webb Keane (2003) have explored how these elements of language might be used to understand cultural dynamics. In a related line of inquiry, J. L. Austin (1962), in his seminal How to Do Things with Words, explores the pragmatic dimension of language. Demonstrating how language operates beyond representation, Austin argues that language “does things,” such as confer titles, create relationships, and dissolve obligations: language is, in this sense, performative. Combining insights garnered from Austin’s work with a focus on linguistic idiosyncrasy (which assumes the individual as the locus of meaning production [Johnstone 1996, 2001]), chapter 6 shows
how diamonds, like linguistic utterances, are both in and of the world, and as such, are used performatively. In short, diamonds “do things.”

“The Fullness of Diamonds,” the concluding chapter, revisits questions opened in this introduction, reviews themes suggested by ethnographic materials, and discusses how this framework might be expanded. Reflecting on the main arguments advanced in each chapter, which are organized heuristically in terms of iconicity, indexicality, symbolism, and performance, the conclusion shifts in scale, from a close discussion of diamonds to commodities in general, to explore the larger implications of this case study.

Investigating—instead of assuming—how signs are interpreted provides us with a method for understanding how people navigate the various social worlds in which they inevitably participate. In deciphering the unpredictability present in consumer narratives, and what it might suggest for anthropology as a discipline, I call for a keener interest in idiosyncrasy: far from trivial, and without lauding “individualism” as a political or social position, idiosyncrasy makes living in society not just bearable but also intelligible. Its presence must, therefore, be integrated into cultural theory.

But there is an even more vital political point to be made here. Semiotics is not only about interpretation; material culture is not simply a blank slate for unconstrained meaning making. Material culture also motivates and expresses activity. By casting local variations against larger cultural patterns, by paying attention to the particular within the general, we open a theoretical space for creative agency—for recognizing that alternative ways of being are often hidden in plain sight.