



Sorting out commodities

How capitalist value is made through gifts

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Far from being a self-enclosed system, capitalism is unable to create most of the skills, relations, and resources it needs to function. Capitalist accumulation depends on converting stuff created in varied ways, including photosynthesis and animal metabolism, into capitalist commodities. Capitalist commodities thus come into value by using—and obviating—non-capitalist social relations, human and non-human. How is this done? This article shows the importance of assessment practices in creating commodity value from non-capitalist value forms. Sorting mushrooms offers a startlingly clear example, because the mushrooms are basically unchanged except for sorting. Yet, similar practices are found in many commodity chains. Alienation cannot be taken for granted; it must be built into the commodity.

Keywords: value, commodity chain, capitalism, economic diversity, gift-commodity distinction, alienation

How do commodities become valuable? Too often, anthropologists think that we know the answer to this problem before we begin any research. Under capitalism, we say, commodities *define* the value system. This means that there is no mystery to the value of commodities. It takes a long lever to budge a taken-for-granted object. In this article, my artificially lengthened lever is a “turnabout is fair play” version of the anthropological contrast between gifts and commodities. My argument is straightforward: Despite all the apparatus of private property, markets, commodity fetishism, and more, taking the gift out of the commodity is never easy. It is work that has to be repeated over and over.

We imagine a capitalist logic of value that has taken over the world. This paper shows, in contrast, how capitalist commodity value is everywhere created through tapping and transforming non-capitalist social relations. Marx’s term “primitive accumulation” is useful in extension: Capitalism does not transcend primitive accumulation, but continues to depend on it. Capitalist commodities gain value through conversions from non-capitalist transactions. The anthropological contrast

between gifts and commodities—in its artificial starkness—can illuminate the process by which non-capitalist social relations can be removed from things, making capitalist commodity value possible.¹

Anthropologists contrast gifts and commodities as icons of different systems for making value. Strathern paraphrases Gregory: “If in a commodity economy things and persons assume the social forms of things, then in a gift economy they assume the social forms of persons” (Gregory 1982: 41, quoted in Strathern 1988: 134; see also Mauss [1954] 2000; Graeber 2001). Capitalist commodities are disengaged from their makers and at the mercy of market transactions. Things are exchanged for things, and once exchanged, the exchange, and the steps that led to it, can be forgotten; the commodity is available for use or further transactions. Gifts, in contrast, are akin to persons; they bring something personal with them, drawing the receiver into a social field, and serving as a continual reminder of the need for reciprocation. They thus animate different systems of value: Value in a commodity system is in things for use and exchange. Value in a gift system is in social obligations, connections, and gaps.²

The point of this contrast is to clarify social logics through abstraction. To join this discussion is to enter into the spirit of analytic play, asking what can be learned through the dichotomy. Actually existing relations of exchange are, of course, mixed and messy. Not only do self-described gifts and commodities nestle beside each other, but they also incorporate each other’s characteristics, change into each other, or confuse different participants about their gift-versus-commodity identities. Furthermore, new kinds of commodities are constantly under construction, in the process reworking the category (see Foster, Ortiz, and Dalsgaard in this issue.) Yet, none of this blocks the use of the gift-commodity contrast for thinking through value.

Most of the time, anthropologists use the contrast to explore the distinctive qualities of gifts, with commodities as a foil. Familiar capitalist commodities are the not-gifts that need no further exploration; the commodity stretches for the purposes of the contrast.³ Here, I essay the opposite: my goal is to defamiliarize capitalist commodities, and my gifts will be not-commodities, stretching for the contrast.⁴

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1. My discussion here refers exclusively to commodities shaped by capitalism; I thus define commodities by the alienation that constitutes them. In doing so, I follow Marx ([1867] 1992), whose discussion of the commodity renews curiosity about commodities by showing how conversions between money and alienated commodities make accumulation possible. It is possible to define the commodity quite differently. Thus, Appadurai (2012), for example, defines commodities as any goods in exchange. This allows him to sidestep the specificity of capitalism to discuss strategies of manipulation in all exchange, capitalist and otherwise. Following Kopytoff (1986), Appadurai rejects a gift-commodity distinction because anything exchanged is a commodity.
 2. Many anthropologists, of course, do not accept this distinction. See note 1.
 3. Even analysts who reject the gift-versus-commodity contrast use the capitalist commodity as a foil against which to explore non-capitalist social relations (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1990).
 4. Ton Otto and Rane Willerslev have alerted me to an exciting literature, particularly about Siberia, showing how exchanges go in and out of categories one might call gift,

My gifts include all objects of exchange in which parts of the giver are embedded, extending social relations beyond the transaction. Thus teaching, even under salary, is a gift if the teacher forms a mentoring relation with the student that extends beyond the lesson. Using this definition, many commodities-in-the-making have a life as gifts. However, if they will channel profits to the propertied class—that is, become *capitalist* commodities—the gifts must be taken out of them.

This essay explores one common apparatus for purifying commodities in contemporary capitalism: the introduction of assessment work into the commodity chain. Assessment can do varied things in converting value systems. Let me call forms of assessment designed to block gift-like social relations “alienation assessment.” Such assessment works not so much by its conceptual categories—the focus of most debate about assessment—but rather by bringing in assessment workers who know nothing of the gifts that have resulted in the proto-commodities they assess. Their presence changes the terms of the next set of exchanges: earlier promises embodied in things are forgotten.

Why, I have wondered, are matsutake mushrooms sorted over and over? Matsutake are gourmet wild mushrooms of high value in Japan. The transnational trade in matsutake brings fresh mushrooms from forests around the northern hemisphere to Japanese consumers. Only low-value mushrooms are processed before they arrive at retail establishments; the best mushrooms are sold whole and fresh to restaurants and individual buyers. Yet, matsutake change hands many times between the forest and retail markets; many dealers buy matsutake along this route. What is there for these dealers to do, other than properly store and transport the matsutake? Their main activity turns out to be assessment—the sorting of mushrooms into value classes. At every step on their journey, matsutake are re-graded. Because the mushrooms don’t change much, an observer might think, “Isn’t once enough?” Yet, the obsession with assessment suggests that sorting is important. Might sorting make value by purifying the mushrooms *as a commodity*?

Sorting mushrooms is assessment reduced to its basics. It allows us to consider the role of assessment in commodity value more generally. Although its significance is covered up by ideologies of market transparency and supposedly neutral technologies, assessment is built into every commodity chain, from design through marketing. Thinking through assessment allows us to consider how the commodity form can be made without industrial labor through a process of translation.

The word “assessment” in a scholarly essay cannot but draw to mind the emergent regime of alienation assessment in scholarship itself, and a momentary detour there helps show what I mean. Even under neoliberal management, scholarship is only barely commodified as a product, but the goal of business-oriented regimes of assessment has been to congeal more property-like qualities in research—to make scholarship at least potentially a commodity. Yet, as every anthropologist knows, research and writing are full of gifts. Not just fieldwork: Consider the workshop for which I composed this paper. Most of us accepted the

tribute, trade, and barter (Ssorin-Chaikov 2000)—and how one might use techniques of “montage” to get a sense of such perspectively fragmented exchanges (Willerslev and Ulturgasheva 2007).

invitation because of a sense of unfulfilled social obligations, the essence of a gift economy. Furthermore, we each hoped to learn something in the intellectual commons of workshop discussion. Another aspect of a gift economy is the inability to make things fully private, and if there is even one fully private idea in anthropology, I haven't heard about it. The point of academic assessment exercises, however, is to move forward the project of privatization by erasing the common space of the workshop and the social obligations in which it is entangled by turning individual papers into points. Alienation assessment privatizes and commodifies by interposing a process that is self-consciously blind to constitutive social relations.⁵

The importance of assessment is particularly evident in capitalist formations that rely on supply chains. Capitalists who control supply chains rationalize inventory instead of disciplining labor and natural resources in factories and plantations. But without pre-disciplined workers and things, inventory is likely to be contaminated with gift-like qualities. In this context, the matsutake commodity chain is not just an oddity, but, instead, is exemplary. These points are worth explanation.

Supply-chain capitalism

The matsutake commodity chain exemplifies contemporary models of business profit in two ways: it uses independent contractors instead of wage laborers to forage for the mushrooms, and it thrives from the private appropriation of once-public or common resources. To explain the significance of these features requires some discussion of supply-chain business models (Tsing 2009). My term “supply-chain capitalism” is intended as a helpfully jarring oxymoron for this explanation. The term juxtaposes the boosterism of business elites, who advocate “supply chains,” and the radical distress of critics, who show us “capitalism” instead of markets. In that juxtaposition, I locate an array of startling dissonances with common assumptions.

From the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth century, the discipline of labor and natural resources was commonly seen as the central task of the expansion of capitalism. Critics saw more violence in the process than business elites did, but both agreed that the model of efficiency and profit created by nineteenth-century English industrialization would rule the world. This model depended on free labor—that is, workers who were unable to make a living except by accepting a factory wage. Because they had no other ways to support themselves, they were willing to accept the discipline of the factory, becoming something like machines themselves in their relationship to the products they made. The enclosure of the commons in rural England had produced a migration to the cities of just such ready-and-willing labor. Factory discipline created what Marx ([1844] 1959) called “alienation”—the separation of the worker from the commodities he or she produced. Alienation defined capitalist commodities, which ideally retained no element of workers' personal engagement when they went to market.

Even for displaced people with no independent means to make a living, alienation never came naturally. People had to be trained into alienation. This was the point of government and industry programs for the discipline of labor. Even

5. For an insightful discussion of academic audit, see Shore and Wright (2000).

when these programs were strongest, alienation was never complete. Workers remained engaged with their work, which, despite deskilling, required skills.⁶ Yet, a gap had to be created between workers' engagements and market value, because only this gap channels profits to factory owners. This gap has become a bigger problem in supply-chain capitalism, where the discipline of labor is not the point.

Since the late twentieth century, business elites have stopped imagining the control of workers, and the corporate expansion that follows, as the key to success. Instead, powerful firms try to get rid of workers entirely through contracting and putting out. Supply chains rather than vertically integrated corporations have become the rage. In a supply chain, discipline is directed toward inventory. Labor and natural resources are costs to be reduced by finding someone willing to take care of these issues for less. This generally means finding workers who are willing to do the job for reasons other than wage-and-benefits packages. Such workers do not fit the ideal of free labor. Violence may be evident in their recruitment, as when immigrant women sit in locked workshops because labor contractors have taken their money and papers. But there is another kind of non-freedom, too: the possession of one's own skills and work agenda. (Recall that free labor is defined not just against coercion but also by freedom *from* the ability to make a living elsewhere.) Independent contractors work not for wages but for themselves. They may consider themselves entrepreneurs, imagining their skills as "capital"; they may accept contracts at a loss because they are thinking of potential opportunities. Unlike the free labor of early English industrialization, independent contractors are difficult to separate from the products of their labor. Without alienation, the products urge further social relations. This is the problem that interests me, and it is a problem that has plagued all capitalism but is particularly evident in supply-chain capitalism, where independent contracting is the model for all labor.

For independent contractors, commodity provision has many gift-like qualities, involving the extension of the person, and her social relations, into the product. Even quintessential factory workers, such as China's textile and apparel workers, may describe themselves as independent-contractors-in-the-making, gaining experience on the assembly line, hoping to open boutiques. They don't do the job for the wage, they explain, but for the experience (Lisa Rofel, pers. comm.; Pun 2005). Entrepreneurship becomes the dream of the poor as well as the rich. So how do capitalist commodities—without workplace alienation—come into their own?

The matsutake commodity chain illustrates. In the sections that follow, I develop three points: First, mushroom hunting is not alienated labor. Firms cannot buy mushroom hunters' labor power. Mushroom hunters are independent and come to the hunt for their own purposes. When they sell the mushrooms to buyers, they offer a part of themselves, which one might call a gift. Indeed, perhaps the gift is the essential part of the transaction; the commercial part is to the side. Just as exchanges of armbands and necklaces anchor the Melanesian *kula*, with pig and yam transactions on the side, gifts of personal experience and sociality-in-the-making hold together the matsutake hunt. But, then, how is this capitalism? By the time those mushrooms reach Japan, one day later, they are an ordinary capitalist commodity, offered at wholesale auctions and supermarket negotiations with other

6. Satsuka (forthcoming) developed my understanding of these issues.

vegetables. I argue that the transition between foraged mushrooms and capitalist inventory cannot be taken for granted; it should be the object of our attention.

Second, the problem is taking not just the hunters out of the mushrooms, but also the forest. Non-timber forest products are notoriously difficult to control as private property, because it is impossible to guard every potentially harvestable forest space. Whether or not they are legislated that way, there is more than a whiff of the commons in any non-timber forest product. If the mushrooms are not private property, how can they have value as capitalist commodities?

This question reveals another salient feature of supply-chain capitalism. Elite firms turn to supply chains to avoid managing not just labor but also natural resources. Supply chains cut the costs of managing natural resources by allowing poorly regulated suppliers to steal, salvage, or forage raw materials.⁷ Just as subcontracting and outsourcing form the labor component of supply-chain capitalism, stealing, salvaging, and foraging form the natural-resource component. Stealing, salvaging, and foraging mix and blend, and not only in their contrast with twentieth-century ideals. Suppliers lower their costs by taking advantage of the privatization of what once were public or common domains; taking raw materials from such domains is a kind of stealing. Such arrangements raise urgent questions about private property as a precondition of capitalist commodities. What does it take to turn stolen, salvaged, and foraged materials into commodity value? Raw materials must be translated into private, and thus alienable, commodities.

Third, as the mushrooms proceed toward consumers, they become gift-like again. Ironically, it is just when the matsutake reach importers in Japan that privatization and alienation are most fully in place. Otherwise, it would be difficult to sell the mushrooms as a commercial product. Yet, to Japanese consumers, matsutake are a quintessential gift, presented to reaffirm a relationship. After all that work turning the mushrooms into a capitalist commodity, they become gifts again. Thus, value moves in and out of the commodity form.

The next three sections of this essay take up these three domains: first labor, then private property, and finally consumption. The mushrooms look the same from the time of picking to the time of eating—and yet they change to stay in the chain. The changes are what give them value as a commodity. Sorting is a good way to see how this works.

A festival of freedom

Every autumn, in the central Cascade Mountains of Oregon in the US Pacific Northwest, hundreds to thousands of seasoned mushroom hunters arrive to pick matsutake. If they buy a permit, they may legally pick and sell matsutake in five adjoining national forests. The US Forest Service has laid out a rough “industrial campground” that can hold five thousand. Many also set up in private campgrounds, crowd into cheap motel rooms, or, if they have the resources, bring an RV.

7. Another characteristic form of resource management under supply-chain capitalism is “substitution”; that is, cheap materials replace more expensive ones. Poisonous or untested materials may be introduced into products; safety scandals are the predictable result. While not irrelevant to matsutake, such issues are beyond the scope of this essay.

Each morning around dawn, hunters go out individually or in small groups to look for mushrooms. Most come back to their camps by four in the afternoon, and by five, dozens of buyers have opened tents along the highway. Buyers compete to attract mushrooms. Mushroom hunters exchange information with each other about prices; when they don't like anyone's prices, they sometimes hold back en masse, sitting in their pickups with their mushrooms, waiting for prices to rise. Prices change rapidly, often jumping \$10 per pound in an hour as buyers vie with each other. Around nine thirty at night, buying wraps up. The buyers sell their mushrooms to on-site bulkers' agents who help load them on trucks to ship to cities near airports. Exporters, many with offices in Vancouver, British Columbia, buy them. By the next morning, the mushrooms should be on a plane to Japan to be sold either at wholesale auction or through negotiation to wholesale buyers in Japanese cities.

The mushrooms spend only half a day in the United States after being pulled from the ground. During that time, they are sorted at least two times: once when the buyer takes them from the mushroom hunter, and next in a warehouse before air shipping. Why? It is not because buyers can't sort. The buyers are *good* sorters. It is an act of prowess to sort mushrooms well; it is the essence of the art of buying. Buyers are proud of their ability to sort with speed and accuracy. They know mushrooms: without looking, they can feel interior insect damage; they can smell the provenance of the mushroom. To watch a buyer sort is to see a performance. His or her arms are flying across the sorting crates; it is a dance full of concentration and intensity. Why should the mushrooms be sorted again a few hours later? Worse yet, the second sort is done by bored and poorly paid casual workers, who know nothing of mushrooms. Why?

To answer this requires delving into the social scene. Then, you can see how the first sort, by the roadside buyers, enlivens a celebration of what participants call "freedom." Through dramatic and competitive sorting, the exchange of mushrooms and money affirms the prize of freedom, which hunters carry with them in the next day's mushroom hunt and bring back in that evening's dramatic buying. In contrast, the second sort, performed by casual workers who know nothing of mushroom hunting, disengages the mushrooms from the performance of freedom and breaks their social ties, thus transforming the mushrooms into alienated commodities. This section concentrates on the performance of freedom so that when I return to the second sort, you may see it as a transformation of value. In turn, to show you freedom, I need to both dissuade you from your presuppositions about the meaning of the term and introduce you to the several distinctive freedom agendas carried by central Oregon's mushroom hunters. In the buyers' tents, I argue, varied communal freedom agendas are juxtaposed, becoming co-constitutive "boundary objects" (Star and Griesener 1989). Freedom creates value in the mushroom hunt through both its multiplicity and its public cross-ethnic display in performances of buying.

Mushroom hunters in Oregon are adamant that they come for their own reasons. This is not "work," many explained. Instead, they discussed their activities as "freedom." Freedom does not mean what readers may imagine of the term. This is not the individual "rational choice" of neoclassical economics; it is also not the "liberation" imagined by the American Left. To follow mushroom hunters into

freedom, one must allow it to be an emic term—that is, a local explanation of what the hunters do, not only in the hunt but also in the buying tents.

The Pacific Northwest’s matsutake hunters come from diverse backgrounds. The majority are refugees from Laos and Cambodia who moved to the United States in the aftermath of the US-Indochina War and the civil wars that followed. They join white Americans, an important proportion of whom are veterans of the same wars. “Freedom” is the key word in that *lingua franca* through which these quite disparate groups explain how they co-exist in the forest. Using the word “freedom” draws on shared American privileges through diverse histories of anti-communism.⁸ Furthermore, freedom is the gift that everyone needs; it refers to how veterans and refugees process experiences and memories of war. Many of the mushroom hunters have terrible stories to tell, stories of the US-Indochina War and the violence that followed it. Many tell war stories when I ask about mushrooms; war is in their minds every day. (For a fuller explanation of matsutake hunters’ war experiences, and their role in motivating the hunt, see Tsing 2013.)

Mushroom hunters’ war stories vary, coalescing along the communal lines that structured conflict. Southeast Asian refugees are not a unified group: They have varied war experiences as Khmer, ethnic Lao, Hmong, and Mien. Each has a different history of involvement with war. Furthermore, their relations with white veterans are fraught; white veterans have a completely different set of war experiences. The term “freedom”—in English—is a fragile negotiation of sameness amidst such differences. One way to follow mushroom hunters into what they call “freedom,” then, is to consider the communal agendas for surviving war experience each group refers to through the term.

White Vietnam veterans seek refuge in the forest from post-traumatic stress. Rick says he was a Special Forces sharpshooter in Laos and Vietnam. When he came home from the war, he says, he was “wild.” He joined the sheriff’s office but was dismissed for shooting a suspect six times. Now, he lives in an RV near the matsutake forest; at the end of his driveway, he has placed a sign saying that unexpected visitors will be shot. Although Rick was always gentle with me, he joins a white rural culture in which armed readiness and the ability to survive on one’s own are highly valued. Rick told me that white veterans, angry that Southeast Asians were in the forest, had killed more than half a dozen. This report was not confirmed by other sources; still, true or false, it speaks to the unresolved anger of many white veterans. As did other veterans I met, Rick explained the freedom of the forests as an experience both learned in war and against war. Another veteran screamed at night and shot up

8. An increasing number of Latinos, mainly from Mexico and Guatemala, are entering the Oregon matsutake harvest. They come with entirely different stakes. For them, this is another harvest to fill an annual harvesting cycle, the other components of which are in agricultural fields and orchards. Because the social dynamics linking white and Southeast Asian mushroom hunters currently dominate the scene, I do not discuss Latino harvesters in this paper. One way to understand the prevalence of white and Southeast Asian discussions of freedom, however, is as an attempt to exclude undocumented pickers, such as Latin Americans, by reference to US prerogatives. Most Southeast Asian refugees are either American citizens or permanent residents.

his mother's house—so he came to the woods. He fears the flashbacks; he seeks the freedom of the forest.

Mien refugees offer a sharply contrasting meaning of freedom. Mien were shifting cultivators in the hills of Laos; caught in the American War, many ended up in Thailand and then the United States. Mien mushroom hunters miss life in the hills. Nai Fam told me she felt trapped in the crowded apartment building in which she had resettled in California. She came to the forest looking for the freedom of remembered village life. This freedom, too, involves working through war memories, but quite differently than white vets do. Nai Fam spoke of trying to forget the terrors of the war in the sociality of the mushroom camps. Mien form village-like communities in the forest; this, they explained to me, was freedom. “This is a good place to live and a good place to die,” another Mien woman explained.

Hmong differ again in their explanation of freedom. Like Mien, Hmong came from the hills of Laos. But Hmong refugees in the United States want to *remember* the American War, not forget it. War experience affirms their ethnic sovereignty (Tsing 2012). Tong brought his son to the forest to teach him survival skills he had learned during the war and to tell him of the legacy he hoped could be maintained. Hmong hunters had many stories of war and of survival. “Hmong means free,” refugees sometimes said, and in that freedom, ethnic pride, war memories, and masculine survival skills are entangled.

Khmer refugees long for healing from Cambodia's civil wars. Freedom, Khmer refugees explained, is the use of one's body. As Mien did, Khmer told stories of war's confusions; instead of preserving a narrative of war, as many Hmong do, Khmer hope to live beyond it. Cambodian soil was laced with landmines, and some mushroom hunters are missing legs. Others lived through the privations of detention. Sida came to the United States with legs weakened from malnutrition and exhaustion. She stressed the importance of hiking in the mountains; through mushroom hunting, she had regained her health. This, she said, was freedom.

Ethnic Lao refugees were soldiers—or war-based entrepreneurs, smart in frontier enterprise. At night, Lao run gambling games and open noodle tents in the forest. Noy, the daughter of successful female traders, told of escaping from Laos' capital city, Vientiane, when businesses were regulated by the Communist regime; freedom for her is the right to do business. Freedom here takes a commercial as well as a political form. Kheung explained why he came to the United States instead of France: “In France, they have two kinds, freedom and communist, but in the United States they have just one, freedom.”

Freedom means different things to participants with different communal agendas. It can be freedom *of* war or freedom *from* war. It can be freedom to remember or freedom to forget. Mushroom hunters comb the forests, following these forms of freedom. But they come together as a public in the buying tents, where hunters of every ethnic background arrive to sell their mushrooms. In the buyers' tents, freedom takes on new border-crossing meanings for everyone. At the moment of a buyer's performance, it is also the freedom of money, competition, and the market economy. It is the freedom promised by the intersection of US political culture

and capitalism. The freedom to live out one's trauma in the forest is united with the freedom of dollar bills.

Lao women are among the most successful buyers. Many were war-and-frontier seasoned traders before they came to the United States—or else have learned from their mothers. Their husbands sit outside the buying tent, sharing war stories and tonic-strengthened liquor with potential mushroom sellers. At the buying table, the women's hands flash as they deftly sort mushrooms and calculate prices. Lao men show off their martial prowess, but women know best how to buy.

The other key buyers are white men, who perform the sorting with the agility and speed of juggling. Their concentration is aided by the fact that they do not guard the money, which is handled by a wife or girlfriend. Khmer and Mien buyers are also men, with or without female help. Even those who rarely touch the cash are alert to prices. The prowess of buying is combining the performance of sorting with the performance of rapidly shifting prices. These are entangled: Sorting divides mushrooms into price grades. Mushroom hunters choose buyers as much by their sorting practices as by their basic prices.

Every buyer aims to put his or her fellow buyers out of business by manipulating prices and sorting practices to force responses from other buyers. Raising the price suddenly, for example, forces other buyers to raise their prices, and hopefully, from the instigator's perspective, buy too much at too high a price. Bulklers' field agents are central players in this action; during the buying they devote themselves to manipulating the competition. Although buyers are independent, bulklers' field agents advance buyers the cash they use for buying. Field agents thus dictate prices, although buyers often choose to lose or to play within the margins of their potential commissions. Furthermore, it is common for buyers to use money advanced from one bulker's field agent to buy mushrooms to sell to another bulker. Thus, both buyers and field agents see every night as a dramatic and competitive battlefield, in which the object is to dupe and decoy as many others as possible, and come out with the prize. One might call this a "free for all," and certainly freedom is on everyone's mind.

Buying is thus a performance of freedom, indeed a performance that holds together all the multiple kinds of freedom of mushroom hunters' war experiences. As buyers sort the mushrooms, money seems to come into being as the effect of freedom. Sometimes pickers film or photograph that moment in which the sorting results in cash in hand, especially if the cash includes hundred-dollar bills. The thrill is not just the money as a token to buy something else; at least for that moment, hundred-dollar bills are displayable trophies of freedom. Such trophies are a gift that, mushroom hunters say, creates a "fever" to go out hunting again, to find more mushrooms, to turn again to lively mobility and hatred for communists to watch them transform back and forth to hundred-dollar bills.

Performative sorting and buying is a David Graeber (2001) moment of making things valuable through public action. But the thing that is made most valuable here is freedom, which can become so many things.⁹ The mushrooms are not unimportant. Pickers and buyers sometimes asked me to photograph their best mushrooms, and they look proud holding them for the camera. The best

9. Again, this freedom is not individualism but a set of partially overlapping communal political agendas, each fluid and responsive to changing challenges.

mushrooms are trophies of freedom, along with hundred-dollar bills. The sorting creates trophy value: the pride of the hunt. Trophy value requires that the experience of obtaining the thing remain in the thing. Trophy value holds for the buyer as well as for the hunter. Buyers are still exclaiming over the beauty and abundance of their mushrooms when they close the lids of the plastic crates and load them into bulkers' trucks. This is still a moment of competitive jostling; the buyer could sell to a different bulker. Freedom is still being dramatically performed, creating a field of open-ended social obligations and alliances. The crated mushrooms are not yet a capitalist commodity, disengaged from human labor. They still extend relational tentacles—the value regime of gifts.¹⁰

It is the job of the bulker to clean off those tentacles before they can be passed to exporters who will send them to Japan as capitalist commodities, devoid of connection to the mushroom hunters who found them. This, I argue, is the point of the second sorting, performed in the cold light of a warehouse in the hours before dawn. Most of the warehouse workers I saw were casual employees with no special interest in mushrooms. They stand quietly at their stations to re-clean, re-sort, and re-pack the mushrooms; there is no performative drama here. In Oregon, I met back-to-the-land white hippies looking for a little extra cash. In Vancouver, I met immigrant Hong Kong housewives doing the same job. These are people who do not want job commitment. They don't care about mushrooms. Their sorting practice separates the mushrooms from the hunters. No longer a trophy of freedom, the mushrooms are ready for export.

“But,” I imagine you saying, “why can't the bulkers just ship the mushrooms, tentacles and all? Surely they would be gone by the time they reach Japan.” Japanese importers sort the mushrooms again, so it is not just grading. Let me go back, for a moment, to scholars. We are expert sorters; we come into prowess by our abilities to tell the difference between a brilliant paper and a dud. We *own* scholarship and its gifts through this prowess. It takes bureaucratic assessment machines, run by uninterested technicians, to take away our ownership, returning scholarship to university ranking protocols. Matsutake bulkers are businessmen willing to position themselves between exporters tied to Japanese economic conventions and buyers committed to a local American gift-and-trophy economy of war and freedom. They contract with field agents who join the fray among the buyers. Between the field agents and the exporters, they must transform the mushrooms into an acceptable export commodity. They need to recognize what they are shipping and represent it to the exporters. Re-sorting helps them *know* the mushrooms.

One detail illustrates. It is illegal to pick, buy, and export very small matsutake, known in the US Pacific Northwest as “babies.” The reason is that the Japanese market is not interested, although US authorities say that conservation guides the

10. In 2007, when prices dropped, a Canadian buyer named TC had himself filmed while stomping on his most expensive mushrooms as a dramatic protest (Horner 2007). In the video, he alternately holds up mushrooms to admire their beauty and jumps on them, shouting, “Eat your heart out, whoever's making the money.” Such affect-laden mushrooms are not yet alienated commodities.

regulation.¹¹ Matsutake hunters pick them anyway, and buyers claim that the hunters *force* them to buy small mushrooms.¹² Bulklers remove babies in their extra sort. Because the mushrooms are small, I doubt if this makes much weight difference. US authorities never check export crates for babies. But discarding babies helps bring the mushrooms into commodity standards. No longer entangled in the exchange of freedom between hunters and buyers, the mushrooms become commodities of a particular size and grade.¹³ They are ready for use or exchange.

Making things private

Across the world, in the central mountains of Yunnan, China, matsutake are also making their way to Japan. Here, I turn from labor to property: Privatization is all the rage in China today, and forests have not been exempted. In Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture, forests have been divided among households, each responsible for forest management.¹⁴ Yet, privatizing forests is not as simple as handing down new policy. The forests carry older layers of collectivization and common use. Matsutake depend on these layers, even as they have become a mainstay of the new entrepreneurial economy. This is a place to look for how the work of assessment can make things private—that is, create the private property that is the precondition for a capitalist commodity.

The mountains of central Yunnan are famous not just for matsutake but also for forest tenure experiments that make this area the pride of policy-oriented scholars and officials (Yang et al. 2007; Yang et al. 2009). Here, they argue, privatization is a success. Elsewhere, villagers flock into the commons to pick matsutake, creating a chaotic situation that cannot be good, they argue, for either the economy or conservation. In the Chuxiong area, matsutake forests have been divided. Every household is free to either harvest its own matsutake or contract to someone else. Many villages hold auctions to assign rights to matsutake in the forests of all their members. The auction provides a guaranteed income to each household. The auction winner, usually a member of the village or a relative, picks and sells all the mushrooms, taking the profit. According to its advocates, this arrangement promotes both social welfare and individual advancement. Some think it also good for conservation.¹⁵

11. If all mushrooms are picked before their spores mature, there is no reason—in terms of the reproductive success of the fungus—to privilege babies. Some advocates of the policy imagine that a few more mushrooms will be missed, or will be eaten by wildlife.

12. Babies are conventionally sorted into the “number 3” grade (out of 5), although hunters sometimes intervene to get a few into the more expensive “number 1” crate.

13. Buyers in the central Cascades sort matsutake by maturity into five priced grades; bulklers re-sort by size. Exported mushrooms are packed by both size and maturity.

14. This is not private property in the US sense. Forests belong to the state, which contracts them to households.

15. Privatization allows household managers or their contractors to wait until the mushrooms are the right size for the market before picking them. This raises prices and is good for exporters. This practice also conserves mushroom babies, discussed above.

It is not my goal to show that these advocates are wrong. I am interested in what goes into making things private, and there is no better place to look than a model experiment in privatization, for there is a contradiction here: even as they are privatized, the mushrooms depend on older layers of communal use. To explore this, I must tell a story about more-than-human sociality. The non-capitalist social relations on which capitalist commerce depends include non-human actors.

Matsutake are fundamentally social creatures. As mycorrhizal fungi, they form joint organs with tree roots for nutrition and to promote the growth of the tree. Matsutake build social relations—but not with just any tree in any forest.¹⁶ Matsutake partner with trees in places where nutrients are not available; if there were too many nutrients, the trees might reject them, or other fungi might take their place. To create a matsutake forest, one must remove rich humus. The “one” who removes it can be a glacier, a landslide, or a volcano, but it is often a human, or at least a human project. Matsutake like human-disturbed forests, and Yunnan (like Oregon) is a good place to find them.¹⁷

Farmers in the area I am describing use forests for a number of purposes that disturb the forest, maintaining the open architecture and oak-pine-mineral soil relations favored by matsutake. Farmers use trees for house-building. Non-timber forest products are equally valuable. There are goats to graze. There is firewood to gather.¹⁸ There are pine needles to rake for the pig’s bedding; once caked in feces, pine needles are transferred to the fields, where they fertilize crops. Leaves are collected for green manure. Pinecones are harvested for seeds, and pine pollen is collected for the cosmetics industry. Many people also collect medicinal plants—and many, many kinds of mushrooms.¹⁹ Within all this economic activity, matsutake is the most valuable item. Paintings of matsutake grace the walls around village houses, proclaiming this as their most important product. Matsutake is the poster child for forest privatization policies.

Here, then, is the opening paradox of matsutake’s privatization: Matsutake forests need human disturbance. They cannot survive forest destruction, but they need disturbance to keep the forest open and the humus from building up. Yet, the goal of privatization for matsutake is to keep disturbance out so that only the contractor who has won the bid has access to the property.

The resolution I found is simple enough: Without official notice, the forest is open seasonally to communal use. During matsutake season, the forests are closed. The forest holder or contractor paints blazes on boundary trees to signal that no one should enter. The rest of the year, people who are accustomed to using the forest use it. Although officials and experts are not informed, villagers come with their goats and their gathering baskets and their rakes; they take away firewood and

16. In Yunnan, matsutake pairs with both pine and oak-like trees (e.g., *Lithocarpus* and *Castanopsis*, as well as *Quercus*).

17. My understanding of matsutake forest ecology is based on Japanese sources (e.g., Ogawa 1991). Disturbance ecology is less commonly embraced in Yunnan, where regional experts often prefer US-promoted human exclusion-based conservation.

18. Firewood is needed every day to cook pigs’ food.

19. Officials say that six hundred thousand people in Yunnan make their living, at least in part, through wild mushrooms.

pinecones and pine needles. They keep up the disturbances that facilitate matsutake's presence. Thus, the social relations of the commons make it possible for private contractors to harvest matsutake.

But this also means that matsutake are never as private as dealers down the commodity chain might like. The long history of collective and common uses of the forest grows into the mushrooms. This is clearest, perhaps, in the mushrooms that never make it to contractors. Contractors hire forest guards, but guards are never fully successful in keeping out poachers—who are villagers who know every inch of that forest. Contractors worry that the guards (often relatives, certainly villagers) themselves poach. Keeping the mushrooms under control is not easy.

Even the mushrooms picked and sold by the contractor carry too much history. Consider the fact that the contractor is a big man in his village. Contractors admit that, out of deference, no one bids seriously against them in village auctions for matsutake rights. Some contractors are matsutake dealers; others are close associates. Dealers, considered *laoban*, or “bosses,” are icons of success. Local contractors and dealers command the respect of kinship and patronage relations with long histories in varied forms of collective endeavor, both state sponsored and otherwise.

Contractors and dealers build personal relations with their clients, transcending individual transactions in long-term loyalty. In my research area, common kinship as well as Yi ethnicity and language build a relationship people described as “trust.” This is how I came to understand an astounding—to me—feature of matsutake dealing in these villages and small towns: Matsutake were handed over without negotiations over quality and price.²⁰ Dealers pick up mushrooms from villagers, often handing them money without discussion. Contractors send matsutake to the rural dealer on the bus. “The dealer always gives us a good price,” people said.²¹ There is almost no sorting of the mushrooms during these transactions.

The contractor and the dealer are figures of the new market economy. They embody local success in private entrepreneurship. But just as they salvage private products from the commons, so, too, in obtaining their goods do they salvage social relations from communal and collective histories. Earlier state practices of procuring village products without market relations are one relevant layer. In building patronage relations, dealers and contractors benefit from structural relations of mediation that recall historical relations of tribute. Thus, for example, twentieth-century village leaders funneled agricultural products to the state. Local products were not capitalist commodities under this system because they carried the weight of public responsibility, not private gain. Rural matsutake dealers and contractors draw on this history, even as they adamantly refuse it—but thus, their products are not yet fully private.

20. The dynamic I am describing depends on the common social and linguistic world of Yi dealers and mushroom hunters in my research area. In Yunnan's Tibetan areas, quite different social dynamics are in place; dealers and hunters speak different languages and come from different communities. Trust does not exist, even at the first level of buying (Michael Hathaway, pers. comm.).

21. Relations of trust go in both directions. Dealers spoke of trusting pickers to name a proper price when drivers, picking up mushrooms, did not know market conditions.

What does it take to privatize goods soaked through with communal obligations? The small town's dealers bring their matsutake to a city with an every-day mushroom market. On the way to, or in, those markets, everything changes—through sorting. The mushrooms—many of which have sat so far without sorting—are suddenly thrown into a maelstrom of dealing and assessment. Every time the mushrooms change hands, they are sorted. Mushroom scholar David Aurora (2009) saw matsutake change hands eight times in two hours in a Yunnan mushroom market. I saw a lot of action, too. The dealer may have just finished sorting the matsutake. He hasn't even paid for the mushrooms yet. Another dealer walks over and wants to buy. He sorts out from the already sorted mushrooms the group of matsutake that fit his needs.

This is a different kind of sorting from that I saw in Oregon. There are no persistent grades. Instead, each dealer sorts out the mushrooms that he or she thinks will fill a specific market niche. The difference from Oregon has to do with potential destinations. Almost all the Oregon mushrooms go to Japan. There is a small domestic market, mainly for Japanese restaurants and grocery stores, but the bulk of the sorting follows grades set by Japanese importers. In contrast, in Yunnan there are just too many mushrooms for the Japanese trade. The Japanese don't want all those mushrooms. They take the ones they consider the best: large, fresh, young buttons with a regular shape and light coloration. The rest must find users in China. Matsutake is not a traditional Chinese food, but Japanese acclaim has created a stir, and matsutake has become a high-priced treat at restaurants, and an expensive, impressive gift. Yunnan matsutake are sorted, then, not just for export but also for varied domestic markets. Some can be sent to other cities. Some go to the best restaurants and gift dealers. Some find a home in less exclusive restaurants—down to neighborhood eateries. Some can be peddled with vegetables on the street. Small hard buttons enter the emerging frozen matsutake market.

Dealers always look to develop new niches; all that sorting is part of the process. The best mushrooms, by Japanese standards, are funneled off early: brought to export companies, who sort again, rejecting many. Rejects rejoin mushrooms that didn't seem worthwhile to send to exporters. These are sorted again, as multiple dealers look for the niche that might offer a price for that one, or that one. Sorting is an art of pulling out classes for specialized market connections. The point is the proliferation of niches.

Almost no sorting, then a flurry of sorting: What is going on? In the township, the mushrooms are still communal and public. The sorting in the marketplace turns them, changing their nature. Suddenly, they are creatures of market niches, ready for this buyer or that. Market assessment obviates the mushroom's provenance in the commons and the commune. The mushrooms become private. They are ready for capitalist commerce.

Return to the gift

In Yunnan exporters' warehouses, laborers re-sort matsutake destined for Japan, ensuring that it arrives as a private commodity known only by size, grade, and weight. In the warehouse, mushrooms are labeled by regions of origin, but when packed for Japan, even that slight information about communally constructed forests is gone from the labels. Japanese law requires that imported foodstuff be sold by country of origin, not by region, because the latter is a privilege reserved

for Japan-grown foods. By the time the mushrooms have left the warehouse, exporters have prepared them for Japanese standards. They are inventory.

Yet—shazam!—on their arrival, the mushrooms (whether from Yunnan, Oregon, or elsewhere) start turning back into gifts with their very first sort by importers and wholesalers. From the first, the sale of matsutake is wrapped up with the making and maintaining of personal relationships, and the importance of such relations only intensifies as the mushrooms head downstream toward those who will eat them. Through assessment, the mushrooms take on relational qualities; they are given the power to make personal ties between people. This is a different kind of assessment: It creates the personalism of elite marketing. It illustrates another way that capitalism embraces non-capitalist social relations.

Wholesalers sell matsutake by negotiation or auction to another layer of middlemen—in English translation called “intermediate wholesalers”—who in turn sell them to retail businesses, such as supermarkets, grocery stores, restaurants, and traditional inns. Wholesalers do not offer goods such as matsutake passively; it is their job to match sellers with prospective buyers. One man who managed matsutake at a wholesale house explained, “I never sleep during matsutake season.” Whenever a shipment comes in, he must assess it, supervising the sorting. When he has made a judgment about the quality and special characteristics of the lot, he calls the right buyers—the ones who could use just that kind of matsutake. He is a matchmaker, using assessment to find particular relational qualities in the mushrooms, which in turn make them a natural match with particular buyers. He has already given the mushrooms relation-making powers: the powers of quality.²²

Intermediate wholesalers are even more invested in making matches. Unlike wholesalers, who make a commission on sales, they make nothing if they do not find the right match. When they buy from wholesalers, they are often already thinking of a particular client. Their skill, too, is the assessment of quality, the characteristic that can forge relationships. The exception here is agents who work with supermarkets, who are more concerned with quantity and reliability than with quality. Supermarkets buy the bulk of lower-value matsutake. But fine matsutake are the preserve of small retail businesses who buy from intermediate wholesalers, and their relations flavor the whole trade. Assessment is the necessary ingredient of this flavor; it allows sellers to extend personal advice—not just sell a generic commodity—to buyers. The advice is the gift that comes with the mushroom, extending it beyond use-value or exchange-value.

The best matsutake are sold in specialty grocery stores and expensive restaurants, which pride themselves on knowing their clientele. One grocer explained that he knows his best clients well: he knows when a ceremony that could use matsutake is coming up, such as a wedding or an extended-family reconciliation. When he buys from the intermediate wholesaler, he, too, is already thinking about particular clients. He contacts these clients, maintaining a relationship, not just selling a product. There is a gift in the matsutake even before it leaves the commodity sphere.

For individual buyers, too, matsutake is a gift. It is rare for anyone to buy matsutake just to satisfy individual desire. Matsutake is bought to give to someone

22. My understanding of matsutake “matchmaking” depends on the astute analysis of Shihō Satsuka (pers. comm.).

else. It is an expensive present, and it must be eaten quickly, before it spoils; unlike a bottle of liquor, it cannot be passed to another receiver. This makes it even more powerful as a gift: there is almost a coercion to accept the relationship it brings. It is impossible to refuse it without wasting it entirely. That is one reason matsutake is sometimes described as a bribe: it forces the receiver to accept the relationship. Suppliers sometimes give the firms that order their supplies matsutake as a gift. It is a gift that confirms and commands long-term commitments. Matsutake always comes with strings attached.

That is the point of a gift economy. The mystery here is how an ordinary commodity—so recently just inventory—can extend itself to personify the spirit of the gift. Assessment can do this job, just as it can take the gift out of the commodity. Japanese traders assess matsutake to put the gift back into it. This is not the gift of American freedom or of Chinese commons, even should American or Chinese mushrooms be chosen.²³ The gift Japanese traders establish is the gift of quality, the cement of good relations.

What, then, is capitalism?

I have just argued that matsutake is a capitalist commodity that begins and ends its life as a gift. It spends only a few hours as a fully capitalist commodity: those hours it spends as inventory in shipping crates on the tarmac and in the belly of a plane. But those are hours that count. Relations between exporters and importers, which dominate and structure the supply chain, are cemented within the possibility of those hours. As inventory, matsutake allows calculations that channel profits to these lead firms, making the work of organizing the commodity chain worthwhile from their perspective. This is my explanation for repetitive sorting.

I might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb: This situation is not unique. Despite the power of capitalism, *all* capitalist commodities wander in and out of capitalist commodity status. This is because the discipline of labor and natural resources, which builds alienation and privatization into the commodity, is never fully successful. Capitalism always requires non-capitalist social relations to accomplish its goals. This is particularly obvious in supply-chain capitalism, where lead firms do not even try to discipline labor and natural resources, limiting their discipline to inventory.

Consider the great business success stories of our times: inventory behemoths such as Amazon and Wal-Mart. Such firms concentrate all their energies on inventory; everything else merely facilitates the control of inventory. Among critics, they are famous for promoting shocking arrangements, such as coerced and unremunerated labor, prison-like working conditions, and the dangerously sloppy use of raw materials. At Wal-Mart stores, employees work for less than subsistence

23. Alas, for the American and Chinese trade, neither American nor Chinese matsutake are considered fine by Japanese connoisseurs. American matsutake are a different species, and despised for it. Chinese matsutake are seen as unreliable for coming from China. It is relevant to the analysis here that neither American nor Chinese mushroom pickers and dealers have any idea how poorly their mushrooms are rated in Japan. The high prices mislead pickers into thinking that their mushrooms must be the best. This not-knowing is evidence of a disconnect between source areas and final assessors—a disconnect built into the commodity chain by multiple assessments.

wages; Wal-Mart suppliers, forced to continually lower their prices, resort to ever-more-scandalous labor and environmental practices (see, for example, Moreton 2009; Ehrenreich 2002; Lichtenstein 2005). What seems scandalous here is non-capitalist social relations, whether of slavery or theft. Their scandalous status allows us to see them; they do not collapse into the taken-for-granted status of capitalist discipline. This is a Conradian *Heart of Darkness* moment, where the horror of how capitalist commoditization works is laid bare (Conrad [1902] 1999). We become aware that non-capitalist relations *constitute* capitalist commodities. They are built into the “every day low prices” at Wal-Mart. My argument is that this visibility shows us the ordinary condition of capitalist commoditization: It is never a pure form, but always interwoven with non-capitalist social relations. Capitalist commodities are simultaneously capitalist and non-capitalist.

It is in the context of this argument that I have stretched the concept of the gift to cover a rather heterogeneous field of non-capitalist, but generally non-violent, forms of exchange. I don’t feel the need to convince you that the war-stained celebration of freedom in the hills of Oregon is really best analyzed as gift exchange. What is clear is that it is not capitalist discipline. Calling it gift exchange allows me to make this point; my stretch draws from a long tradition in anthropology of making the gift-commodity dichotomy do the work of clarifying cultural logic. Similarly, the tribute-like status of matsutake in central Yunnan deserves a more nuanced analysis. Calling it gift exchange, however, opens a window through which to see the constitutive role of non-capitalist social relations in making capitalist commodities.

What am I trying to say about capitalism? Capitalism requires economic heterogeneity; it is the source of its success. Through incorporating non-capitalist social relations, capitalism achieves its creative strength as a system. Such incorporation, however, is not something finished and under control, once and for all; rather, it is an everyday problem. Capitalism thrives from it—but it also makes capitalism weak. The messiness of capitalism is both its strength and its vulnerability.

In the last twenty years, it has become increasingly popular for critics to imagine capitalism as a singular, enclosed, and coherent system, united by a common cultural logic. This turn to holism is surprising, given that holism in other domains is unpopular. Still, there are reasons for it. For those who follow Mauss to study non-commodity relations, as I mentioned earlier, capitalism is a contrastive foil. The unproblematic unity of capitalism keeps the foil from becoming overwhelming; the point is not to describe capitalism but to show other ways of being. There are also reasons to imagine capitalism as a closed unity for those who *do* describe capitalism. Describing capitalism as a whole is one way to lead a charge against it. Thus, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) identify “empire” as an enclosed global political economy with no outside. Such approaches embrace the unity of capitalism as a strategic opening to opposition.²⁴

24. Similarly, David Harvey (2007) shows capitalism as a coherent whole; like Hardt and Negri (2000), he aims to inspire resistance against this whole. For those who look at neoliberal governance, such as Nikolas Rose (1999), capitalism’s enclosed system is the base from which to explore and protest new modes of subjectivity.

In striving to show how capitalism fits together as a whole, such analyses miss the open-ended processes in which historical contingencies are awkwardly woven into capitalism. These contingencies (re)produce not only business as usual, but also the excesses, nightmares, and vulnerabilities critics need to grasp if we want to engage with capitalism as something more than an object of contemplation or refusal. For those of us who feel battered by the continual heightening of inequality and injustice, yet hold out hopes for alternatives built through collaboration and alliance, the historical contingencies of capitalism give us hope.²⁵

Let me be clear: I am not advocating a liberal analysis of many capitalisms. Capitalism is a system of commensuration. That is why assessment is so important to constructing the links of supply chains. Assessment offers a translation that makes it possible for products to continue down the chain. Translation between capitalist and non-capitalist forms of sociality is the work that makes capitalism a system. We know translation is betrayal; assessment work erases gifts. But the process is ragged. It must work well enough for profits to be made by lead firms; that is why they organize these chains. But that doesn't mean that there are no rough edges. Those rough edges are a purchase point for both intellectual and political work.

Among other things, this means that there is important work for anthropologists to do. Describing those rough edges is a job for ethnographers—observers willing to be surprised by details. If we are willing to notice, the world is full of surprising social forms. In the process, too, new ethnographic forms arise. Following capitalist chains often requires ethnography in multiple sites; the work described here emerges within experiments in collaboration to make that possible (Matsutake Worlds Research Group 2009). Furthermore, a full understanding of alienation in the process of commodification requires attention to the life worlds of species other than humans. Multispecies ethnography meets political economy in this emerging field.

Here, there are possibilities for new kinds of ethnographic attention. Too often we let ourselves be swayed by theoretical orthodoxy, and we stop noticing. We assume the success of capitalist discipline; capitalism, we think, remade the world in the nineteenth century, and now all it has to do is chug forward like a locomotive on its tracks. Too often, scholars just want to follow around the railroad engineers. The not-thought-through world they helped make is far more curious.

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25. There is considerable scholarship developing this point of view. Anthropological accounts of women's factory work opened attention to non-capitalist social relations in the formation of capitalist labor (e.g., Ong 1987; Rofel 1999; Zavella 1987). Analyses of women's trading have shown the role of heterogeneous social relations in creating capitalist markets (Guyer 2004). For the stakes, see Gibson-Graham (1996).

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Le tri des marchandises : comment la valeur capitaliste est créée par les dons

Résumé: Le capitalisme, loin d'être un système clos sur lui-même, est incapable de créer la plupart des compétences, des relations et des ressources dont il a besoin pour fonctionner. L'accumulation capitaliste dépend de la conversion en marchandises capitalistes d'un ensemble d'éléments créés de diverses manières – y compris la photosynthèse et le métabolisme animal. Les marchandises capitalistes entrent donc en valeur en utilisant – et en détournant – les relations sociales entre humains et non-humains. Pour décrire comment cela s'opère, cet article montre l'importance des pratiques d'évaluation dans la création de la valeur marchande sur la base de valeurs non-capitalistes. Le tri de champignons en offre un exemple saisissant car les champignons ne sont pas transformés, si ce n'est par le tri. Des pratiques similaires se retrouvent dans plusieurs filières marchandes. L'aliénation ne peut être tenue pour acquise, elle doit être intégrée dans la marchandise.

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