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# The Alchemy of Brand

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# THE ALCHEMY OF BRAND

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# INTRODUCTION

## Brand Leads

Imagine, that you are walking into someone's home for the first time, perhaps a co-worker you have known for a while, and as you do, try to re-create the kind of awareness and observational perspective you would have as you do so. Your eye moves around the room, from the TV to the set of high bookcases, back to the couch, then along to a desk, computer, set of speakers, smartphone, then back to the TV. You continue and walk into the next room gazing at the contents: what's on the book shelves, what's in the kitchen, pantry etc. What kind of house did you picture? I mean, what kind of a TV, what kind of books on the bookcases, what kind of couch, what kind of computer, speakers, and smartphone? What do these things tell you about their owner? And, how? Now, can you describe any of these things in this person's home *without* the brand? Did you picture the TV, the computer, the speakers, the smartphone without your mind picturing and engaging a specific brand? Now imagine you've walked through the whole house and looked at every room. You've seen every single thing a person owns, but what did you really notice—the brand. What can these brands tell you about what kind of person lives here?

The right answer, if you got it, is quite a lot. At least this is the answer that our modern consumer societies' economy is betting on. From 2015 to 2016, global advertising expenditure grew by 4.6% to $579 billion, up from last year's 3.9%— on trend with the ever-increasing amount of money that is being poured into the brand (Barraclough). On the consumer's end, marketing experts estimate that most Americans are exposed to somewhere between 4,000 to 10,000 branded advertisements every day. Of course, nobody would recall actually seeing, say, 6,000 ads in their day because we've all developed a careful filtering process to ignore the vast majority of these messages. Rather than overburden our brains by trying to recall how many ads you can remember seeing since you woke up, imagine an average morning: you wake up, check your email, your FaceBook, Twitter, maybe you Google what the weather

is going to be like today. At this point in time your brand count is maybe a couple hundred ads already. Next you get out of bed and open your closet to get dressed—maybe another 20 or 30 brand registrations and decisions here— I won't ask you to open your pantry, watch TV, listen to the radio, browse the net….you get the picture. All of these seemingly passive, quiet, and unconscious moments we share with brand are happening constantly with almost every individual across the globe. But still, when it comes to actually thinking through and trying to understand how brand impacts our everyday life, let alone everyone else's, or how this gets woven into in the fabric of our culture, we are silent. Yet the effect and impact of this near-constant and deeply engaging brand contact is happening largely unconsciously. The role, place, meaning and impact of brand on our world remains largely unexplored and illusory.

Our project begins with the seemingly straightforward question, "what is brand?" However, we immediately find ourselves at an impasse before the project has even begun, recognizing that our most basic conceptions of the consumer/brand relationship are largely incompatible with the theoretical framework put forward by dominant discourse of brand. As a result, without a discourse to fully ground ourselves in, our project must start from a kind of beginning. In short, we must not only reconstruct and reformulate a notion of the consumer/brand binary and answer the basic question "what is brand," but also go beyond and develop a full ethnographically-based framework that allows us to move beyond the binary and engage the more important questions of *how* brand works in relation to consumer identity. This leads us to chart a framework designed to address and engage the precise ways individual identity and brand interact. Focusing on one's individual identity *and* brand, we arrive at a conception of brand acting as a dynamic vehicle for self-creation, constructing and externalizing identity as well as conferring agency to the consumer. Thus, our project is not just a question of what *is* brand, but an engagement of *how* brand works, a question that ultimately reveals itself to be inherently intertwined with the larger question of identity itself.

What is at stake in the engagement of brand is nothing less than the fundamental question of individual identity in our modern consumerist society. To ignore or dismiss the influence of brand in our modern culture, as well as its deeply imbedded presence in the very fabric of our society, is to be blind to

the power and reach of the now-global corporate power structure. The necessity of engaging both philosophy and anthropology in addressing the brand is plainly visible as brand continues to occupy an increasingly powerful cultural role. The greatest project to dismantle and engage consumerism—with the brand as its spiritual core– was, after all, undertaken by generations of anthropologically and philosophically-minded thinkers from the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory. But today, when consumerism and the power of the marketplace has reached its apex, relatively speaking, there is an undeniable silence on brand and consumerism. The project of engaging the nature of the brand practically requires that we bear in mind the classic concerns and methodologies of both philosophy and anthropology when addressing it today. From the vantage point of philosophy, brand is intertwined with the fundamental questions of individual and collective identity. What does it mean to live in a world where identity has seemingly been commodified? This is a question we can only uncover if we return to the most foundational philosophical questions and texts. From the vantage point of anthropology, the cultural force of the brand as a structuring force on every level, from the individual to the highest echelons of ideology, is undeniable even as it takes on different forms in different cultural contexts. Equipped with the methodology of ethnographic fieldwork, anthropology is uniquely situated to engage the brand in a way that would take us beyond just the theoretical. Even in the more recent past, questions of consumption and brand were infrequently overtly linked to identity-creation, but today it is rampant and impossible to ignore. With the advent of an increasingly social media space and an increasingly fast and nimble marketplace to match it, the speed with which we see, internalize, and consume brand races forward. Today, I can see my favorite celebrity wearing a certain pair of Nikes and in just two business days Amazon will have them on my doorstep. Any critical engagement with brand ultimately leads back to an engagement with identity, which is itself a distinctly modern feature in the ever-changing landscape of brand. The stakes in critically engaging brand only increases and grows more insistent each day as it matches the ballooning cultural phenomena that is brand.

As an overview, our project is a kind of journey that unfolds and develops into an ever-deeper understanding of brand, and we must move slowly and carefully. Employing and engaging both

philosophy and anthropology, our project seeks to trace the development of the "modern" brand through a philosophical discourse that begins with ancient Greek philosophical thought on property, identifying a tension and instability inherent in this earliest writing on the product in a social context, before arriving at Marx's commodity, where the language of property gives way to the language of commodity which encodes an inherent social instability. With Marx's alienated commodity we see that the instability or tension inherent in the commodity is a product of the void created by the rupture of social meaning and economic meaning. As we see, the brand—as a device of meaning-making—inevitably gravitates towards this Marxian void between consumer and the commodity, presenting the possibility of reinventing the alienated and abstracted commodity. In short, our philosophical journey traces the tensions and instability of the product turned commodity, and having identified the salient characteristic of the commodity to be its unstable social meaning, we see how the brand is invoked to step in to fill this gap. Our initial philosophical analysis allows us not only to definitionally situate and engage the modern brand, but also to identify its naturalized salient characteristics as an unstable site where meaning is constantly created and recreated by the engagement and relationship between brand and the consumer.

With a working definition for brand, as well as a developing picture of the core social tensions it is rooted in, our engagement with anthropology began by modernizing the discourse of the brand, finding that the binary of brand as a consumer/brand relationship was the dominant discursive theoretical framework for understanding and engaging brand—the same theory we came to in the previous section. Reviewing and engaging the anthropological writing related to the brand, our project found that very little work had been done to engage any grounded or situated analysis of this purely theoretical brand as consumer/brand binary. Engaging the literature related to brand allowed our project to see more clearly the points where brand was being engaged, but more importantly where it was not. Introducing and situating the ethnographic context of our project and its brand knowledge, we critically engage the focus group as a unique site of knowledge production. Having situated our project in a larger anthropological discourse on brand, as well as providing the ethnographic dimensions, our project put forward its own situated ethnographic account of what brand is, attempting to go beyond the binary of consumer/brand to

engage how brand *actually* works.

Our anthropological analysis begins with brand as a relationship between consumer and brand; our provocation emerges out of an insistence on a situated analysis of the intersection of brand and identity, arguing that brand serves as a dynamic vehicle for self-creation, constructing and externalizing identity and conferring agency to the consumer. As our project presents, when you see yourself as recognized by a brand, you are effectively translating a meaning and making it your own in a process—no matter how large or small—of self-creation. Furthermore, we present that, in the relational engagement with brand, consumers have recognized that they are spoken to and heard, and on a fundamental level that brand confers upon its consumer some degree of agency solely by virtue of the consumer *choosing* the brand they feel better fits their identity—and in doing so, through this consumption they take possession of brand and its properties. Recognizing a deficit in our knowledge of how the particular binary of consumer/brand actually functions on a grounded level, our project presents not only a new framework for engaging with and understanding brand but also an insistent focus on the productive points of intersection between brand and identity. Through a focus on the individual consumer's engagement with brand, we see a dimensionalized portrait of what brand is and exactly *how* it works. This allows us to critically engage with the modern brand, as well as recognize and anticipate the movement of brand as it becomes an increasingly important part of individual identity, ultimately ending at the critical juncture of "self branding," where identity itself takes on brand-like qualities. Our construction of a new framework for thinking about brand allows us to not only critically engage with brand as we see it, but also points us towards a critical engagement with the modern reality of the individual living in an increasingly branded world. Ending our project by returning to the most basic questions of individual identity, through our engagement with Hegel we ultimately see, even more clearly than before, that the project of understanding brand is inextricably linked with the project of understanding the self on an individual level. Our project concludes by attempting to situate the brand in an increasingly tumultuous world where knowledge, identity, and the role of the brand are rapidly transforming, and where personal identity and agency is being turbo-charged in the process.

Our project is ambitious, in part by choice and in part by necessity, yet nonetheless we must deliver a project that is only possible through a unique perspective: the perspective of an outsider writing on brand through the lens of philosophy and anthropology, but also as an insider who has worked in the intimate site of brand knowledge production that is the focus – through my work as qualitative research consultant. This is, in part, why I purposefully move between "I" and "we" in the different contexts of our project; in some instances I am speaking from my personal experience and analysis and in other instances my analysis is grounded in the context of my work and requires a plural pronoun. At the same time, this "we" must also be distinguished from the autorial "we" employed more generally when discussing "our" project. Thus, in many ways our project can deliver a framework for understanding and engaging brand that is a unique result of this reflexive insider perspective on strategic brand positioning as an independent consultant—a niche job, in an already niche field. On a basic level, this project endeavors to go beyond delivering a new framework for understanding and engaging brand, by substantiating it with context, quotes, and perspectives directly from focus groups. Of course, this ethnographic material is filtered through the lens of a marketer to some degree; however, in many ways it also remains open and unadulterated for broader considerations. For example, when I observe a focus group I do not simply capture content pertinent to the particular client's project and its goals, but I write and capture *everything*. In this way, even when I have forgotten what specific "learnings" the project produced, I still have complete notes that offer insight for broader considerations. Frequently, someone will say something incredibly interesting in a focus group that has little or nothing to do with the "learning" we are producing for the client, but nevertheless this comment is always bolded. In this way, while I cannot fully escape the marketer within, the raw data offers the possibility of repurposing one's focus, and when I return to my notebook I am looking at it in a distinctly different way and seeing distinctly different themes and ideas emerge.

Equally important as the uniqueness my project gains through the inclusion of ethnographic content, is my perspective on brand and my understanding of how and why it works, as the result of several years of work engaging brand in many different ways and in many different contexts. The result is

a strong, yet reflexive, eye towards how brand is written about, expressed, inhabited and engaged with. At the same time, this does not rob me of any open-mindedness to new ways of understanding brand, as the work we do requires that one's perspective be as fluid and dynamic as the brand. While I come with this kind of 'bias' that I freely admit to, I see it as a strength rather than a weakness. My hope is that this will add some clarity to my project, while preempting certain preconceptions. While it is inevitable that some will see my position inside the world of marketing as an inherent blind point that might compromise my project, for the most part I hope that readers can understand that it is possible, or even advantageous, for a embedded brand marketer to write critically about brand. I have no connections to any of the clients or products I have worked on; the only connection I have to certain brands are the ones I've created myself—just like any other consumer. While my project takes on something of a polemic tone when discussing the literature relating to brand—which I, in part, can't help, due to the strong beliefs I've accrued about brand—my project ultimately is not an argumentative one, as I purposefully avoid making value judgements about whether the cultural power of brand is a good thing or a dangerous thing, also avoiding value judgments about the "authenticity" of any individual's engagement with brand. This is not a difficult position for me to take because it is the most honest one. I don't have or pretend to have the answers to these questions, even for myself. Thus, I hope my project will reflect this honesty. I hope my authoritative voice will come through when it is appropriate, and that my purposeful silence will also be heard. If my project has one overarching goal, it is to show that the cultural and individual phenomenon of brand is something that reveals itself as necessitating our collective critical engagement and attention.

**SECTION I- Philosophy of Brand: Tracing an Instability**

**Chapter 1- Introducing Our Philosophical Approach**

 Although the distinct language of "brand" is undoubtedly a modern invention, when distilled to its functional definition we see it to be as old as recorded human thought. Material, in the broadest sense of the word, has never existed outside of a dialectic cultural context. It is named, given meaning, identity and place. This is especially apparent in commodified material, in property. The commodity, a thing worth selling, buying, and owning, is a material whose cultural meaning or identity is necessarily elevated. We see that, even at this basic level, we have not strayed too far from the instinctual modern ideation of what a brand is. The commodity must have a dialectic cultural identity, a value, a meaning; it must have a place in the relational world of humans and material. Gold is a classic and prevailing example of this — the value of gold is not a product of its material physicality, but rather its cultural meaning. Still, this same basic principle is at play in almost any kind of property. Even when commodity or property is spoken of as *just* a physical thing, its implicit meaning is actually its defining characteristic. Although the physicality of the product may subsume its meaning, the cultural dialectic nature of product remains its essential character.

 Philosophy is, etymologically, a joining of Greek *philo* meaning "love of," and *sophia,* broadly defined as a search for wisdom, knowledge, and the nature of existence. While it may seem curious to begin a project concerned with the modern nature of property and brand in relation to human identity, by first firmly grounding ourselves in the practice of philosophy, we quickly come to see why. If we ultimately aspire to understand the modern commodified property and its brand, we must naturally begin with a discussion of property in its earliest formulations. As we will later come to see, the brand only exists *with* property— it can only exist through the union of the two. Although the language of the brand is modern, definitionally it can be reduced to a cultural meaning or identity that is projected into or onto a product. Thus, while early philosophers are not themselves using the word "brand," they are speaking about the cultural meanings and identities affixed to the world of property and product. As our project

unfolds and progresses towards the modern human relationship with the branded commodity, and as our answers slowly emerge, we must see that, although the discourse surrounding property changes and evolves, many fundamentals remain intact.

We take philosophy as our starting place for two distinct reasons: Firstly, as humans, we exist both practically and metaphysically in a world of things, most of which are made of property; thus, both our practical knowledge of the world, and our more metaphysical wisdom and knowledge of the same world, begin at a distinctly physical and spiritual philosophical place. Secondly, as will be discussed in short order, the tradition of philosophy itself demands that we take property as an essential philosophical beginning. In short, even if our first reason were to falter, as if perhaps philosophy is not as essential to understanding the nature of the human relationship to property, the second firmly refutes this, demanding that we acknowledge property as a starting place. Thus, if we were to embark on a project that seeks to address the modern meaning and nature of property in its commodified and branded forms, whether we choose to or not, we are demanded by philosophy to begin any investigation into the product and its meanings within her domain.

We begin with Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics,* not only because they represent some of the earliest recorded Western thought, nor simply because they undeniably serve as the headwaters of Western Philosophy (and far beyond), but because both texts center themselves around a discussion of property. This speaks to our second "reason," that ancient Greek thought demands that we begin our thinking with a consideration of the nature of property in human life. From here, we jump forward to Kant's *Anthropology,* a text that moves us beyond the more difficult and abstract discussion of property and individual, to an individual who are themselves an object separable from the world they observe. Kant modernizes us and provides our project with an essential perspective, while also strategically serving as a bridge between early philosophical thought and a more familiar "social science" dialectic of individuality. Moving closer towards more culturally and anthropologically-bent ways of thinking, we come to rest with Marx, a thinker and philosopher who fundamentally reimagines a framework for considering society and property. Each philosopher represents a kind of turn in the way we think about

society and property, and it is only through tracing and engaging with these thinkers that we can ground any kind of understanding of the unstable liminal space that the modern brand occupies in society. Each text represents, and uniquely contributes to, our understanding of what brand *is* and *does*, and why it has appeared in many iterations and forms to serve as the companion of property. As an historical philosophical journey, these texts are as illustrative in their performance of the instability of property, as they are important in understanding how notions of property and brand have developed. To understand the modern nature of the brand, we must come to understand how the instability and tension that seems inherent in the relationship between culture and consumption, individual and commodity, has created the *necessity* of the brand in its modern form.

**Chapter 2- The Problem of Property in Ancient Greek Thought**

Within Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*, two of the most canonical texts in philosophy, the problem of ownership or possession is a theme that each text circles around. However exhaustively the problem of property is addressed or answered by the formulation of the state, the fundamentally problematic nature of property is taken for granted. Although the structure of Plato's *Republic* seems to be predicated on and around notions of property and ownership, there is no apparent substantive interrogation of the nature of property. Insofar as we know that property is problematic, especially with regard to class relations, we never know exactly *why*; thus, the problem of property remains a destabilizing force. Much remains the same in Aristotle's *Politics,* although the themes of ownership and property take on different dimensions that are more directly suggestive of the essential yet unanswered question of property. Although each text reveals the inherent instabilities and tensions of property in their own distinct formulations and contexts, the ultimate effect is that they both present the fundamental essentiality of discussing property and its problematic nature, yet also remain silent on what exactly makes the basic act of owning property so problematic. Although both texts will be analyzed forthwith in regards to this, the curiosity of this apparent "silence" on the problem of property is intensified by the historical fact that there was a vibrant discourse surrounding material wealth, greed, and commodification in the context of the state. This aspect of commodification, in a distinctly numeric economic sense, is

suggested by the vocabulary of the Greek language itself. There is *ploútos,* which perhaps most closely corresponds to wealth, which roughly translates as a derivative of *polýs*, which means "much in number." *Pleonexia*, a philosophical concept which occurs in Aristotle's *Politics*, Plato's *Republic*, and much later in Hobbes's *Leviathan*, corresponds roughly to greed or covetousness. More specifically, this is often interpreted as roughly translating to "the desire for more than one's share;" again we see a specific attention paid to the nature of balance or justice in relation to the distribution of material or commodity (Balot, 28). The many linguistic formulations of different strains of greed in the ancient Greek vocabulary, coupled with the prevalence of wealth and greed as a common trope or motif in writing, poetry, and theater, and its massive political and cultural significance in the philosophical thought of this time, should cause us to even further question the "silence" of these two seminal texts. But also, perhaps we should consider whether, in this instance, "silence" is not just an historic oddity, but rather is indicative of an inherent uncertainty and instability surrounding the nature of humans and material.

Beginning with the destructive nature of material desire, Plato claims it as the natural state of man, and, while Aristotle will soften this claim substantially, arguing that greed is not an inherent human trait, it seems to be taken as a priori that property is inherently tangled in the web of conflict, destruction, greed, and desire. Ancient Greece's preoccupation with material desire is seen not only in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, but also in the complex vocabulary that differentiates different kinds of greed and desire; *aplestia* is different from *philochrematia*, although they both concern an unquenchable desire for more. *Pleonexia*, of which we have already spoken, occupies a central role in Plato's *Republic*. The very function of the state and of "justice" is predicated on the state more broadly as a direct counter to this moral and social dysfunction. In the "formation of the city" in Book V, Plato writes on the common "lazy" people, "They assume that what they see is available and proceed to arrange the rest, taking pleasure in thinking through everything they'll do when they have what they want, thereby making their souls even lazier" (458b). Here, the common person is so enamored not simply by the product of their desire, but rather by desire itself, that they are completely lost in lackadaisical inaction. Plato safeguards his city from the conflict inherent in property by arguing that collective ownership is necessary to

promote a common good. Socrates argues first positively, "…doesn't this sharing of pleasures and pains bind the city together?" and then negatively, "…doesn't this privatization of pleasures and pains dissolve the city?" (ibid. 462b). Invoking the thematic metaphor of the living city, Socrates asks, "Then, is the best-governed city the one in which most say "mine" and "not mine" about the same things in the same way?" (ibid. 462c). Yet, while Socrates clearly states that the best-governed city speaks with one voice on property, the guardians are left with nothing nothing, "…if they're going to be guardians, they mustn't have private houses, property, or possessions, but must receive their upkeep from the other citizens as a wage for their guardianship and enjoy it in common" (ibid. 462c). Here we distinctly see that the guardians, although hierarchically above the citizens, are singled out to maintain the balance of power through their property-less-ness (ibid. 463b). Yet, in a seeming inversion, the guardians, who we clearly see to be elevated above the citizens in every way, are reliant on the citizens for their basic needs of food and water and expected to "enjoy it in common" with the citizens. We must also ask what the guardian class, whose "upkeep" is already accounted for, is expected to do with their "wage" if they are forbidden from owning any kind of property?

Here, we see Socrates quietly wielding property and material as a mechanism to level out or counter-balance the inherently unequal relationship between the citizen and the guardian. Even in a world where Socrates has seemingly designed a system that strips material property of all its power, he is quietly using the necessary provisions of wage and upkeep—paradoxically reinforcing the necessity and power of owned property which he has seemingly attempted to dethrone. True, wage and upkeep do not clearly present themselves as property, but we see them as material infused with potent social power. Going on, in the next paragraph, Socrates reflects, "Then isn't it true, just as I claimed, that what we are saying now, taken together with what we said before, makes better guardians out of them and prevents them from tearing the city apart by not calling the same thing "mine?" Socrates's guardians are more powerful, but, paradoxically, material remains a power-broker between the citizen and the guardian (ibid. 464b). Were the guardian to simply be a citizen with a small privilege over their fellows, these further explanatory paragraphs would be rendered unnecessary. Their hierarchical presence alone, as well as the assumption

of the guardians as conforming to the established rules of the city, betrays the instability. Although Socrates succeeds in removing property, and thus creating a city of shared pleasures and shared pains, he cannot avoid using owned material as a social tool. Thus, he has not truly stripped the nature of property from itself in the context of exchange; what is important is that the guardians must receive their wage and upkeep from the *other citizens*. Thus, on two levels we see that material property remains a power-broker. Firstly, material is used to broker power between the citizen and the guardian, perhaps as a counterbalance to the inherent inequality (especially if we remember the wolves and sheep metaphor previously employed in (Plato 416d). Secondly, this power-brokering is reliant on reinforcing ownership insofar as citizens must provide wage and upkeep for the guardians even if it is enjoyed, as Socrates states, "in common."

It should be noted that this is far from the only instability that surrounds the treatment and development of material property in the *Republic*. In Book III, in what is the first articulation of the formulation of the state with all its classes, the notion of property is again unstable. Considering the guardians, Socrates asserts, "….they must also have the kind of housing and other property that will neither prevent them from being the best guardians nor encourage them to do evil to other citizens." The picture painted here of the relation between the citizens and the guardians is notably different than what it becomes in Book IV; here, the guardians have both housing and property, and although there is the intention of encouraging peace between the two classes, it takes a different form (ibid. 416d). In this iteration, the guardians have property, although, as Socrates states, it is not more than is "wholly necessary;" furthermore, and most importantly, Socrates introduces a sort of manipulative lie, that the guardians will be told that they already have gold and silver in their souls and thus they, "have no further need for human gold. Indeed, we'll tell them that it's impious for them to defile this divine possession by any admixture of such gold because many impious deeds have been done that involve the currency used by ordinary people, while their own is pure" (ibid. 416d). The irony of the symbolic deployment of the imagery of the most commodified of all commodities—gold—as a mechanism of social control meant to keep the guardian class content with their property-less lives, cannot be ignored.

While each chapter illustrates its own internal instability, this unmissable instability in Plato's treatment of property across the *Republic* is magnified and illustrated most clearly by comparing Book III and IV. In Book III we see that the guardians are to have no property, even as property is wielded as a mechanism of social control; but in book IV the guardians "must have property," and again property **(is?)** used as a mechanism of social control in the form of a manipulative lie. Illustrating its instability within Plato's "city," we see that both the ideas of the ownership of property by the guardians changes radically, just as the forms of social control over their ownership change. At no point between these two different conceptions of property is there any explanation or justification, implicit or explicit, within the text, nor is the overt problem of property ownership explicitly addressed.

Following Plato, yet grounding ourselves again in a return to wealth and ownership in the context of ancient Greek philosophy, we turn to Aristotle. Well known for his notion of the "golden mean," Aristotle seems to follow Plato in asserting that wealth and ownership is a finite and bounded thing, while the desires of men know no such limit; what is needed for a "good life" is a moderate amount of wealth or property. There is an often quoted line in Aristotle's *Politics* where he is writing on the nature of the household: "They are the elements of true wealth; for the amount of property which is needed for the good life is not unlimited…but there is a boundary fixed…".  Aristotle, in his discussion of the household and the state, attests that, "There is another variety of the art of acquisition which is commonly called the art of making money, and has in fact suggested the notion that wealth and property have no limit" (Aristotle, 41-42). This keen focus on the economics of supply and demand characterize the treatment of material of both Aristotle and Plato in the context of "the city," with Aristotle going as far as to differentiate the two modes of engagement with commodity: one that is necessary and natural, and one that is excessive and destructive. Herein, Aristotle condemns the pursuit of money for the sake of money, where, "Nevertheless, some men turn every quality or art into a means of making money; this they conceive to be the end, and to the promotion of the end all things contribute" (ibid. 49). Thus, while we have a picture of the greedy man as going against "the good" by disrupting the natural order of the world, despite this pragmatic and vaguely moralistic condemnation, at this point there is no deeper discussion as

to the proper relationship between individual and property beyond the "golden mean."

However, while there appears, superficially, to be a similar treatment of wealth and property between the two concerning the formative nature of property, Aristotle goes beyond Plato in key ways. While both see greed as a vice, Aristotle does not go as far as Plato in suggesting that greed is an inherent character of individual. Responding directly to Plato's *Republic* in Book II, Aristotle defends the necessity of private property, arguing that private property promotes solidarity and prudence, as he writes, "Property should be in a certain sense common, but, as a general rule, private, for, when every one has a distinct interest, men will not complain of one another, and they will make more progress, because everyone will be attending to their own business" (ibid. 126b). However, the most significant break between both Plato and Aristotle, and perhaps in our project's preoccupation with the early Greek concept of material, is Aristotle's corollary argument on the inherently expressive nature of personal property, as when he writes that, "Again, how immeasurably greater is the pleasure when a man feels a thing to be his own; for the love of the self is a feeling implanted by nature and not given in gain although selfishness is rightly censured…" Here, Aristotle is attesting to the potential of ownership not just as a pleasure, but as the manifestation of a love of self implanted by nature (ibid. 1263b). However, Aristotle continues this sentence with an immediate qualifier, suggestive of a kind of hesitation or uncertainty, "…this however, is not the mere love of self, but the love of self in excess, like the miser's love of money; for all, or almost all, men love money, and other such objects in a measure." Admitting the duality of possession, Aristotle contends that there is a natural joy experienced by the ownership of personal property, putting forward this loss of "liberality in the matter of property" as the major argument against Plato's property-less vision.

However, far more important than any kind of disagreement between the two is the nascent development of a uniquely reflexive and individualized treatment of property. Not only does Aristotle point towards the benefits of sharing one's slaves, but he goes far beyond this, writing "It is clearly better that property should be private, but the use of it common; and the special business of the legislature is to create men in this benevolent position." It is admittedly curious that, while Aristotle seems to think that it

would be better if property were private, admitting to the inherent pleasure of individual ownership, he also presents private property's ability to provide an "immeasurable pleasure" which mysteriously seems to be located in the polis, "for the love of man is a feeling implanted by nature…" (ibid.1263b). It seems that Aristotle's notion of private ownership must be predicated on an idealized polis, a notion that remains wholly theoretical. We draw attention to Aristotle's claim of property as, "…immeasurably greater is the pleasure when a man feels a thing to be his own," not necessarily for its superficial break with Plato on a conceptual level regarding the nature of property, but rather because it offers a wholly different treatment of the value and necessity of pleasure. Its uniqueness is perhaps heightened by the similarities that Plato and Aristotle share in their treatment of the nature of wealth and the distribution of property. Here, in a surprising turn, Aristotle pulls the discussion of property from its discussion as a problematic, yet relatively dull, political object, and gives voice to the value of material property as a thing itself. He does not attempt to de-problematize material property, nor put it into a discourse with the broader theme of wealth; in fact, as we see, property retains its danger. Aristotle's unexpected turn towards the sensuous nature of material property as something capable of providing what appears to be some kind of individually experienced pleasure of selfhood, something located in the innate and "natural," exemplifies an uncertainty or an unspoken tension that seems to swirl beneath the surface in ancient Greek philosophy. Aristotle hesitantly seems to draw closer to addressing the actual nature of the individual relationship with property, adding yet another layer of complexity to the instability and tension.

Aristotle advances a notion of material property in relationship to the corporeal individual insofar as he, within his section "Slavery-Justified," equates property to freedom as contributing to an individual's status as both "free" and thus fit for citizenship and political life. Aristotle establishes a kind of dualism inherent in the very act of possession, describing it as "… an instrument of action, separable from the possessor," a distinction that is arrived at through the explication of slavery as the directional possession of slaves by his master, "The master is only the master of the slave; he does not belong to him, whereas the slave is not only the slave of his master but wholly belongs to him;" it is this "duality" of possession that further elevates the importance of the ownership of personal property (ibid. 1253b). Just

as it was for Plato, this formulation of master and slave which Aristotle calls a "science" is the social

construction that allows for politics and philosophy; as Aristotle writes in the "Rule of the Household,"

"Hence those who are in a position which places them above toil, have stewards to attend to their

households while they occupy themselves with philosophy or with politics" (ibid. 1253b). Thus, Aristotle

is perhaps clearer than Plato in stating that the "science" of the possession of slaves is itself directly the

condition that allows for a participation in the political as a citizen (ibid. 1255b). Here, this possession of

slaves creates the order and stability of the household, which is the condition for political participation.

In short, this condition of political freedom is predicated upon, and even reified by, the possession of

human property. Interestingly, Aristotle's discussion of the slave as a possession and of a definitional

notion of possession (which is arrived at and illustrated within the context of slavery) precedes his more

formal and basic description of property in the context of the "management of the household"—of which

we have already spoken.  Again, this is illustrative of a deeper, yet unspoken, preoccupation with the

basic nature of material possession as a relationship between self and other that cannot be ignored.

Aristotle does indeed discuss property directly and formally, beginning, "let us now enquire into property

generally," which seems the intuitive and obvious entry-point into a discussion of property; yet long

before this, Aristotle begins with a far more esoteric treatment of property and possession from the

position of the individual,

> The master is only the master of the slave; he does not belong to him, whereas the slave is not
> only the slave of his master but wholly belongs to him. Hence we see what is the nature and
> office of a slave; he who is by nature not his own but another's yet a man, is by nature a slave;
> and he may be said to belong to another who, being a human being, is a possession. And a
> possession may be defined as an instrument of action, separable from the possessor (ibid. 1253b).

In this paragraph, we see Aristotle addressing the fundamental nature of what it is to be a free man by

juxtaposing him against the slave, which by definition is corporeal. Here, the slave has no essence of his

own for he is without his own telos in that he does not belong to himself, and thus does not fulfill his own

ends but the ends of those he belongs to. This alienation of the self is so complete that he "wholly belongs

to him;" his ends are not his own but the ends of another, his identity is not his own but that of his master.

This seems to be an inversion of Aristotle's enduring refrain that the proper activity of being is, "an

activity of the soul in accordance with virtue;" to be a possession, a slave is to be an "instrument" serving an "action" that is not his own—the complete alienation of self.

Thus, returning to the seeming curiosity of Aristotle leading his reader first through a difficult and esoteric treatment of property and possession as it is seen in the context of slavery, before moving to a more conventional discussion of property, an almost banal conversation of food and other crafts, we can read Aristotle as providing us with two accounts of property. Both are framed in the context of slavery. Firstly, we have Aristotle addressing the essential nature of slavery, that slavery is a complete possession, a possession that renders the possessed a simple "instrument." Secondly, we have a discussion of the role of the slave—a discussion not unlike Plato's. Yet the organization of Aristotle's treatment of man as possession reveals an implicit primacy of one discussion over the other. We see Aristotle present that the division between the naturally-ruled soul and the naturally-ruling body is mirrored in society in the division of men and slaves, "Where there is such a difference as that between soul and body, or between men and animals (as in the case of those whose business is to use their body, and can do nothing better), the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master" (ibid. 1254b). Here, the lower men cannot "possess" competent reason, and thus they are fit only as an instrument to be possessed.

For both Plato and Aristotle, material property is embroiled in a struggle for domination in the most literal sense. Within the political projects that both Plato and Aristotle are engaging in, the struggle inherent in property and material ownership present themselves as formidable barriers. Both problematize property, albeit in distinctly different ways. Aristotle seems to idealistically extol the virtue of private property, while also seemingly admitting the inherent problem of ownership in a society. Aristotle's treatment of ownership and property curiously begins, or is prefaced, with a lengthy discussion of slavery, again pointing towards his more individual-centric consideration of property. While it has tensions of its own, perhaps Aristotle's treatment of property overcomes some "silence" because it more directly addresses the individual. Plato's efforts to rid his *Republic* of the inherent vice of material possession are riddled with tensions and instabilities, in part because of the sheer scale of his project. Even in his most

thorough formulation of the *Republic's* ideal "city," we see that owned property remains as an essential broker of power. Although it lingers beneath the surface, Socrates never directly discusses the nature of property as it pertains to the individual, perhaps because of its instability, although we need not ask where Plato stands on the matter of property. The contradictions, tensions, and instabilities inherent in property disturb the still surface of Plato's *Republic* from the very moment Socrates first describes his vision to Glaucon, and it remains a destabilizing force throughout. The point here is not that Plato's vision fails because he begins with some incorrect formulation of property, nor that the *Republic* is ultimately flawed because it fails to reconcile a coherent treatment of property. Rather, the point is found within the "silence" of material property and how its problematic, destabilizing presence is ignored. Again and again, the struggle over material property and possession shows itself quite visibly to be a central defect of society that Socrates seeks to remedy in the construction of the *Republic;* yet, its essential nature is never addressed.

Aristotle follows Plato in many key ways: they both agree upon the fundamentally problematic nature of a political individual's relationship to the material world of possessions and, most importantly on a fundamental level, within the construction of a political vision, they are deeply occupied with the question of the problem of material possession. However, Aristotle breaks with Plato in an essential way: he approaches, however tentatively, the nature of the individual's relationship to material. In both instances, both in its introduction and eventual greater explication in the following pages and chapters, Aristotle discusses slavery as part of a broader discussion of property; as he freely admits, slavery is just a form of property. However, as we have previously highlighted, there is something curious in introducing a part before its whole — that is, discussing the nature of property in terms of slavery, before discussing property as its larger category, as Aristotle admits, "Now we should begin by examining everything in its least elements…" (Aristotle 1253b). This purposeful organization, although seemingly curious, provides a discussion of slavery as property before it discusses property as a part of the household, and provides us with Aristotle's conception of the nature of man and the nature of man's possessing, before we arrive at any discussion of property in a traditional sense. This attention to property in the formulation of the part

in relation to the whole is especially poignant following our discussion of the *Republic*.

Within some of the first pages of Aristotle's *Politics* we come to an essential paragraph discussing the precise relationship between master and slave. Here the discussion of possession, that serves as the headwaters from which continuing discussions and formulations of property will follow, is defined in the human context of the struggle for possession. Aristotle is clear, the master is master by virtue of his mastery of the slave; here, the master does *not* belong to the slave, where the slave not only belongs to the master, but "wholly" so. Aristotle's formulation is careful and clear — it establishes the master as owning, going beyond to emphasize the master's independence from the slave, before it establishes the doubly-emphasized bondage of the slave; the slave is not just a slave, but "wholly belongs to him" (Ibid. 1253b). Here, the master's "freeness" is counterposed against the utter corporeality and contingent nature of the slave. We are not necessarily presented with a picture of what freedom for Aristotle might be, so much as we are given, in detail, the utter alienation of the possessed. It is here— framed between the master and the slave— that Aristotle presents us with the constellation of possession. Aristotle closes by writing that, "And a possession may be defined as an instrument of action, separable from the possessor," thus the salient characteristic of a "possession," in this case a slave, is that it is an "instrument," a means to an end; this is a complete alienation for the slave, the severing of life and self (1253b). Here, Aristotle's emphasis centers around the nature of complete dependence.

If anything, we have something of a working framework for engaging with Aristotle's notion of property. In explicit terms we see property not simply as the ambient destructive force as it appears in Plato's *Republic* or even as it is described in Aristotle's other writings on property, but as a force that constitutes its own destructive nature; where before property is destructive in a general social sense, here it is incarnate in the literal subjugation of one man over another. However, at the same time, we must question the broader impetus for Aristotle introducing property and, in turn, freedom and bondage, in such a curious and charged context. To what degree we could take the formulation of human possession beyond this context in order to engage more general questions of the individual and ownership is another difficult, lingering question. This is not the only place where Aristotle grants us a more humanized

treatment of property in individualized dimensions.

All of this said, Aristotle may go beyond Plato in some small ways in that he addresses the nature of property more directly in its essential nature and in its embodiment in the individual; these are but brief moments in a text that generally treats property as an inert thing. Yet, just as the *Republic* struggles to address property as anything other than a vague and confused social force, while at the same time suggesting, and at times indicating, a deep struggle beneath the surface of the text, Aristotle does not go significantly further. While the ghost of unattended property seems to make itself quite known through small tensions and struggles within the *Republic*, the ghost of unattended property within Aristotle's work presents more directly, but on fewer occasions and in a much more abstract context. Again, within both texts, property and its assumed relationship with man is left undeveloped, despite the fact that it is the major focal point around which both texts appear to spin. So we must ask why: Why is property so close, yet so far? So essential, yet so neglected?

Now, our project is not a project on the nature of personal property, nor is it a project that desires to chart the philosophies relating to property. Our treatment of Plato and Aristotle is admittedly hasty and necessarily incomplete. However, the origins of something (however they appear from our rear view mirror) are always essential. Through tracing the origin of the human relationship to property, we see a number of important things that can propel us forward. Firstly, and most obviously, as we have seen, the canon of Western Philosophy has its origins deeply set in a philosophy of material, a philosophy that presents property as an essential social problem as evidenced by the fact that two of the greatest works of philosophy appear to have the problem of property as one of their central foci. Secondly, there is an undeniable instability inherent in this treatment and ideation of property, a resistance to metaphorically pulling property aside—isolating it— and seeking to make sense of it. Thirdly, the problem of private property is a social and political problem that is only visibly addressed through the efforts to create or critique sociopolitical systems. Just as the metaphorical problem of property is not deconstructed, the individualistic treatment of property — how one ought to relate to the world of material things and possessions — is underdeveloped at the very best, and even in its nascent form it appears to be highly

unstable.

To move forward in the spirit of our final "question," we must retrace our steps to where we first began by highlighting the multitude of language formulated to delineate specific species and varieties of greed. Now, having moved through the *Republic* and *Politics*, we see that the texts are deeply preoccupied by the question of property, a reflection of their authors own preoccupation. In this historical context, what can we know about property beyond what we have read? Turning to the portrayal of Socrates's Trial within Plato's *Apology*, against his accusers Socrates retorts that the people of Athens should be ashamed that their great city cares more for wealth and honor than wisdom and truth; closing his speech he declares, "Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes but wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively" (Plato, *Five Dialogues* 30b). In a later defense, Socrates attests to the fact that he has never taken payment for his service and that his accusers could not bring one witness who could assert that he ever asked for, or took, pay. Socrates concludes, "For, I suppose, I offer a sufficient witness that I speak the truth: my poverty" (Ibid. 31c). Even within the Apology, through the voice of Socrates, we see a clear mistrust of wealth, but also a qualifier that excellence is a prerequisite to wealth being a "good." Again, we have no shortage of evidence that suggests that ancient Greece and its philosophers were deeply engaged in a discourse on the nature of property; yet, there is very little stable ground to find any sort of stance on the questions of exactly *how* and *why* wealth and property corrupt.

Taking a step back, our engagement with Plato and Aristotle shows a profound insecurity around, and discomfort with, relating to property that is embedded in the headwaters of Western thought. This alone, in our journey towards property in its modern branded context, is an essential discovery. Within these works, Plato and Aristotle are writing a philosophy that encompasses political and social theory; both seek to imagine a society and a way of living that is best. The fact that the problem of property is such a central element is intertwined with the fact that they are writing nothing short of a sociopolitical treatise. Although with such a cursory investigation we can make no grand claims about any inherent "unspeakability" around the human relationship to the world of owned things, but, at the very least we see

that the problem of property and its articulation is nothing new. Although the discourse of property in ancient Greece is not framed in the vocabulary of consumerism, it is framed in connection to a fundamental human identity—desire and greed— nevertheless, there is a distinct unease and "silence" around the nature of the commodity as a source of an almost mystical power. Thus, to see this as testament to the fact that humans have struggled with the mysterious power of material as property since our earliest records, just as they do now, is an essential point on its own. In our industrialized post-capital world, it is easy to see material—property, commodity, brand, whatever you call it—as something new, which in many ways it is, yet at the same time it is essential to recognize the greater history of the instability and tensions of property as a central preoccupation of human thought.

**Chapter 3- Kant's Turn Towards the Individual as an Object**

If Plato and Aristotle were acting as philosophical social theorists, imagining and formulating a social and political way of life, they clearly did so on the broadest scale. They were building cities, moving entire swaths of society into categorical boxes, and orchestrating whole social and political systems. Here, by and large, property and individuals existed only in the abstract whole. In short, the individual in all their particularities and social contexts was missing. Our project turns now to Kant because he exemplifies and captures this paradigm of thought, far along the arc of time from the ancient Greeks, that turns the eye of the thinker—the philosopher, the anthropologist, the social theorist—towards the individual. For Kant, it appears that this *begins* with his initial engagement with anthropology, which today is viewed to be the field of study that exemplifies privileging the particularity of the individual. Kant was not entirely alone in his engagement with early anthropology, although it is notable that he was one of the first. Beginning in the fall of 1772, Kant began holding lectures on anthropology while at Albertus University of Königsberg, which continued until shortly before his retirement in 1776 (Foucault). Building on lecture notes and papers, Kant was believed to have spent 25 years writing the first of his major treatises on what he called anthropology, titling the work "Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View" which was published in 1798 (ibid.*).* Within the text, Kant repeatedly frames anthropology in systemic terms, referring to it as a "systemic doctrine" of the knowledge of mankind.  It

should be noted that, in his most formative years, Foucault was deeply—and seemingly singularly—preoccupied with the notion of the experiential empiricism of the individual subject within Kant's 1785 title *Anthropology*. Together with "Folie et Déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique," Kant's *Anthropology* served as the 24 *thèse principale* for his State Doctorate in 1960 (Bikley 81). Although, Foucault's work on Kant was presented as a secondary thesis in the company of Foucault's seminal work on *Madness and Insanity,* and, understandably, may have worked to overshadow the other, we should not discount the significance of his engagement with Kant's attempts at analyzing and establishing an anthropology of mankind. Furthermore, the significance of Foucault choosing to engage with this particular Kantian text, which never received major attention, should only further the importance in examining Kant's anthropology. Curiously, for both Kant and Foucault, these two respective texts remained (and remain) some of their least discussed. This is evidenced poignantly by the fact that Foucault's 1964 text *Introduction to Kant's Anthropology* was not translated into English until 2003 and even then in the most informal circumstances, as the text was personally translated and published by British academic Dr. Arianna Bove on "Generation-online," a website Bove ran.

To summarize Foucault's most salient engagement with Kant's text, Foucault presents an analysis that introduces Kant as a kind of originator of the idea of self-study or the study of the self as an empirical object insofar as Kant presents the conditions of the possibility of experience as referred directly to the empirical subject. Foucault then highlights a contradiction, which, formed as a question, asks us how Kant's presentation of subject (and in turn its conditions of possibility) as necessarily existing outside of the chronology, as it is itself the starting point of knowledge — then, how could the subject be a starting place for an understanding of knowledge? (Foucault, 60) Thus we have an oscillation, or at the very least a tension, between knowing subject and known subject which, as expounded by Foucault, has direct and explicit implications for anthropology.

Yet, our focus here is not Foucault, but Kant and precisely what Kant *did*. To step away from the Foucault connection and return to Kant's *Anthropology*, we must return to the fact that Kant—at the height of his career—was attempting to establish anthropology as its own autonomous discipline. As Kalyniuk writes on Kant's lectures, "Spanning a twenty-four year period, these lectures documented a developing conception of anthropology with apparently ambiguous links to the entire critical project" (Kalyniuk 98). Kant begins in his preface by highlighting the essentiality of the part in the whole, the human being in "cultural progress." True to its title, Kant's approach is practical; he begins with the human as object, "But the most important object in the world to which he can apply them is the human being: because the human being is his own final end.—Therefore to know the human being according to his species as an earthly being endowed with reason especially deserves to be called *knowledge of the world*, even though he constitutes only one part of the creatures on earth" (Kant, 3). By establishing the human as an object—the most important—who is capable of perceiving the knowledge of the whole whose sum is much greater than the sum of its parts, he moves to make the very basic idea of the practice of anthropology possible. Following this move that establishes the singular human being as an object capable of a "*knowledge of the world,*" Kant moves to present a doctrine to follow this new precedent, writing, "A doctrine of knowledge of the human being, systematically formulated (anthropology), can exist either in a physiological or pragmatic point of view" (3). The pragmatic point of view is distinguished from the physiological knowledge—which Kant dismisses totally—by virtue of its going "beyond theory" as an engaged and embodied knowledge.

The salient characteristic of Kant's vision for a pragmatic anthropology is an engagement with the relational nature of the world; pragmatic anthropology only moves past a lesser theoretical knowledge

when, "…it contains knowledge of the human being as a *citizen of the world*" (4). Parsing the difference

between "to *know* the world" and "to *have* the world," Kant differentiates simple "understanding" from a

deeper "participation" connected to "having" the world (4). Kant's text continues in chapter I, beginning

with a detailed analysis of the practical faculty of the self, of the senses, memory, imagination, and of

cognition more generally. Here, his pragmatic vision of the anthropologist as a human object, almost as a

kind of tool, is reflected in the practical dimensions of his doctrine; he is simply attempting to equip the

individual with the knowledge and tools necessary for an engaged, embodied way of knowing that goes

beyond the superficiality of theory. Kant's vision of anthropology may seem simplistic, as it very well

might be, but this is not out of any omission, but rather is a purposeful design. He notes the considerable

difficulty of arriving at a science that can account for the "considerable difficulties that are inherent in

human nature itself;" following this, he details the inherent flaws both in the observation of self and other,

noting that as soon as the other realizes he is being observed, he *"…cannot* show himself as he really is,"

and in the act of self-study the individual will reach a point where "dissimulation" and habit interfere

(ibid. 4). In short, the very act of observation renders it impossible to see how we or others "really" are, as

the act of observation inherently alters the observed. Thus, noting the difficulties inherent in grasping at

the questions of "actual" human nature, Kant turns towards establishing a pragmatic anthropology simply

defined as "a doctrine of the knowledge of human beings, systematically formulated" (3).

Situated firmly in the tradition of Enlightenment thought, Kant's repositioning of the individual

as an object is an essential move that allows us to step into a new framework of thought with which to

engage the individual and property. Although Kant's anthropology does not directly address property or

the kinds of questions surrounding material as directly as did the thinkers in our previous foray into

ancient Greek Philosophy, Kant modernizes us and provides our project with an essential perspective, while also strategically serving as a bridge between the "grander" projects of philosophy and a more grounded and structured social theory. True to the individualistic paradigm of the Enlightenment, Kant centers his anthropology around the individual part. Although all our three thinkers thus far were occupied by a social project, in some key ways Kant's treatment and methodology of the individual in society is an inversion of both Plato's and Aristotle's formulation. Methodologically, Kant begins with the individual, while Plato and Aristotle are constructing political systems that render the individual inert insofar as they are only discussed, and only retain meaning, when they conform to their ordering. Here, property and the problem of ownership can only coherently be constructed as a matter of policy, just as the individual can only be approached as an abstract piece of a larger whole. Kant begins his anthropology by freeing the individual from his bondage, objectifying him as an empirical object that is, above all, *knowable* to himself. The individual that is knowable to himself is empowered as a critical object that in turn possesses the ability to know the world. Even in the most abstract terms, it is clear that as the individual becomes material, or for Kant, as the human being is objectified, the individual simultaneously becomes both the means and the end of knowledge. It is this material objectification, or making real, that allows the individual to recognize himself as simultaneously both an independent and a relational being. For Kant's anthropology, this is the starting place; through the objectification of the individual, the individual sees himself as a part of a greater "*knowledge of the world.*" It is this individual objectification, this making real, upon which Kant's "manual" for anthropology is predicated. Inherent in Kant's project is a rejection of pure theory in favor of an engagement with the materiality of the "real."

The objectification of self allows for the individual to engage in a dialectical and relational world,

both internally and externally. As Foucault rightfully calls out and problematizes, Kant's human being is both the producer and product of their own knowledge, simultaneously a subject and an object. Regardless of Kant's place or legacy in the history of anthropology, he typifies the turn towards the conception of self as a material and knowable object, a notion which he also demonstrates is essential to the work of anthropology especially. Kant's pragmatism is found not only in his purposefully limited definition of anthropology, but also in his poignant observations regarding the difficulties inherent in any effort to observe the self or observe the other. Regardless of the success of Kant's anthropologic project, in the spirit of his project of pragmatism, quite simply, Kant can be said to establish or embody the turn towards a consideration of the individual as an object capable of engaging in a relational world. In connection to our larger project, Kant establishes the primacy of the human being as an object that exists relationally in a world of other objects (human or otherwise). This is not material, product, or commodity as we typically think of it, but the human as object, which is a fundamental assertion upon which our project is predicated, and thus it would be unwise to omit or take it for granted. And on that point, we seem to have Foucault on our side.

With the individual as an object who exists in a relationally-structured world, we find ourselves in a very different place, with entirely different analytical tools. The study of human beings emerged as a science, and the human as an object of study emerged. The question of cultural divergence and similarity was the primary interest of 19th-century scholars such as the anthropologists Tylor and Morgan, who engaged in debates over whether cultural practice and belief was "diffused" or rather a product of "independent invention." Thus, 'humankind' and its culture becomes an object for study through the double movement of invoking the logic of a universal nature, which, in turn, opens the door for the

identification and deployment of "markers" which might be used to approach culture. If Kant enabled the

individual to become an object of study, then early anthropologists seized upon this new individual utility,

extending the knowability from the individual as object to humankind as object. Here, early

anthropologists are perhaps the best exemplars of this new way of thinking about the world: if we can

identify the individual as an object who exists relationally to other objects, then we have a foundation for

not just the study of the human as object, but humans—and their culture/society etc.—as an object of

study.

If the individual can't be thought of as a knowable object in a relational world, then their

relationship with material objects—which have traditionally always retained their autonomy and object-

hood—must necessarily remain inert. When the individual is empowered with their own objectivity, they,

at last, are fully able to relate to their world. When we are able to see the individual as an object, we can

see how they relate to other objects. Thus, it is this turn towards the objectification of the individual in a

relational—not so far from "objectified"—world, which paradigmatically allows for a world where the

individual becomes the focal point for social and political thought.   In turn, the objectification of the

individual allows for a more precise engagement with the instability and clash of individual and product.

If Plato and Aristotle lacked—or were simply disinterested in— a framework to identify the precise

delineations between individual and product, Kant shows us that it is only in these particular moments or

formulations of instability that we can identify a fundamental character. Marx follows Kant in his

attention to the specific nature of the instability of individual and commodity.

**Chapter 4- Marx and the Commodity**

Having established a philosophic history of distinct developments and turns, with Marx we find

ourselves at a sort of philosophical resting point for our philosophical journey of tracing property—

perhaps even a kind of "ending." It is with Marx that we have our two pieces meet: the individual and the

product. This is a synthesis of the "new" individual, the Kantian objectified individual, existing in a

similarly objectified relational world and the external project. Marx gives us a new, more precise word than the abstract product which we've been forced to use—the commodity. Thus, what we really have is the union of the individual identity and the commodity. Following Kant, Marx operates in a metaphorical "machine room" where the individual is a knowable object, just as that individual's world is similarly knowable and relational. Where Plato and Aristotle couldn't exactly tell us where that problematic product fit into the system, Marx has an answer. Just as Kant allows, Marx's answer is predicated on a dialectic between subject and object. It is with Marx's 1867 *Capital*, and more specifically his chapter on the commodity and his concept of *commodity fetishism*, that we find the spiritual headwaters of the modern dominant discourse that engages with questions of the human relationship with material. As a thinker, Marx stands on a strange rung on the ladder of time; as we see, he both reflects and encapsulates so much of the philosophical thought that has come before him, yet he is also seen as a paradigmatic and distinctly modern thinker. A kind of monument to our modern era of industrialized capitalism, Marx looms and casts a shadow that stretches past the horizon. This is exactly what it means to say that Marx very well could be a kind of "ending." This aside, if you want to write about the relationship between individual and commodity, you cannot avoid Marx; look there….you just used *his* word. In the scope of this project, it seems that our move from Plato and Aristotle, to Kant, and now to Marx, is a natural progression—even if it is a sped-up, "highlight reel."  Marx was the first to directly address the problem of the individual and the product in our modern context—a response to the palpable tensions that I argue have always existed—; likewise, he exemplifies and explodes the objectification of the individual that Kant introduced. We find ourselves at Marx out of a necessity, which is exactly what makes him so important. Equally importantly, a piece of writing is never an inert thing, and Marx's *Capital* may well be the most fitting exemplar of this. When discussing or analyzing Marx's writing, we are also forced to address its interpretations and entanglements and treat it like the thing it is—a living document. Thus, while in some ways we are analyzing, for the most part we are interpreters who are necessarily forced to make claims and arguments.

   Turning directly to Marx's famous conceptualization of *commodity fetishism,* a concept that is

often repatriated and positioned, published in Marx's 1867 *Capital*, we must assert that the text cannot be uprooted from its context within Marx's chapter on commodities, nor from its broader Marxist framework. Marxian thought is predicated on the famous notion of base vs. superstructure, the notion that means and relationship of material production — the base — informs and shapes the super-structure of society that includes culture, institutions, power structures, and the state. As Marx writes in the 1959 *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, "In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely [the] relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production" (128*)*. Thus, the particular strain of alienation discussed within *commodity fetishism* exists within a broader discourse of alienation which is not exclusively or exhaustively characterized within any single chapter. That said, Marx positions the concept of *commodity fetishism* at the forefront of his text, speaking to its undeniable essentiality. The beauty of Marx's *commodity fetishism* is found in its immediate utility and simplicity, as history has surely proven.

Fundamentally, Marx makes two moves: First, *commodity fetishism* is the perception of social relationships involved in production, not as relationships among people, but as economic relationships among money and commodities; second, *commodity fetishism* transforms the subjective, abstract nature of political economy into something that is taken as objective or inherently valuable. Returning to the most basic level with the commodity, which Marx defines as, "A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another;" a commodity contains within it, "The utility of a thing makes it a use value" which is utterly abstracted in the act of exchange (Marx, 173). Recognizing that commodities do not themselves contain any use value, Marx turns to the "remaining common property" of the commodity, that it is a product of human labor. As Marx summarizes in his final section on *commodity fetishism*,

> There is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different with commodities. There, the existence of the things *quâ* commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order,

therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities (165-6).

Thus, through the alienation of the commodity from anything physical or "knowable" in the logic of use-value, within this void the commodity takes on a fetishistic quality. The sensual character of the product has been erased, leaving only the social nature of things. Giving voices to the commodities at the close of this section, Marx writes, "If commodities could speak, they would say: 'Our use-value may interest human beings; but it is not an attribute of us, as things. What is our attribute, as things, is our value. Our own interrelations as commodities proves it. We are related to one another only as exchange values'" (177). The commodity has become a schizophrenic, self-contradictory phenomena, a symbol of itself, whose "being" and "meaning" are entirely at odds. Marx portrays the commodity as a kind of crude "doppelganger," the truly aesthetic artifact whose universal and particular would be authentically harmonized (Eagleton 208-9). Thus, the opposite of the alienation of human labour would be a use-value that makes sense, the exact opposite of the situation we have under capitalism with *commodity fetishism*. Marx turns towards Robinson Crusoe as an exemplar of a relationship between human and object that is "simple" and "intelligible," while juxtaposing it with the "European Middle Ages shrouded in darkness," the historic turn from individual labor to communal (169). Thus, while Marx's *commodity fetishism* contains many constructive and critical technical elements, the thrust of his rhetorical project focuses on *commodity fetishism's* effect as the false universality of human labour that strips the sensuous qualities of human labor to an entirely quantitatively-driven exchange value. Marx understands the commodity as a kind of "false projection" or just falsification of material's "true" or actual value, which is abstracted in the act of alienating a product from its immediate value to the social world. Within an ideal world, a material's "universal," or socially determined, and particular value would correlate. As we can immediately see, the idea of fetishism that Marx picks up on goes beyond the problematic nature of alienation and conflation of value — although this is its core — to a more general critique of the loss of the *subjective* nature of an item's economic value, and into what is thought to be an *objective* value.

Marx's *commodity fetishism* as just fetish is the perception of social relationships in the economic world of production — not as relationships between people but as relationships between money and commodity.

The most immediate problem with directly engaging with Marx's section "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof" is its paradoxically asocial and apolitical nature, at least on a technical level. Marx's work is both social and political as a project, but within the first chapter "The Commodity," as Marx states at the beginning, his focus is not on the nature of the commodity as a human "want" or how the object satisfies these wants; rather, Marx's movement coalesces around a technical treatment of *commodity fetishism* in the context of a critique of modern economic thought (125). Marx speaks to a discourse in that he addresses both "political economy" and "modern economy" in the close of his writing, "And modern economy, which looks down with such disdain on the monetary system, does not its superstition come out as clear as noon-day, whenever it treats of capital? How long is it since economy discarded the physiocratic illusion, that rents grow out of the soil and not out of society?" (176). Here, in the conclusion of the three sections on "The Commodity," Marx's critical and technical project of unmasking the commodity takes a very academic and technical turn, ending with the commodities speaking through the mouth of the "economist" and presenting not a critique of the commodity itself, but a parodistic critique of the economist's commodities. Thus, while Marx implicitly presents a political and social project and toolkit within his discussion of *commodity fetishism*, his true aims are much more technical and academic. Marx chiefly positions himself here not as philosopher or politician, but as critical economist. Recognizing this, we must then recognize that removing Marx's conception of the commodity from its context as technical treatment of economic principles requires some degree of translation. The considerable dialectic legacy of *commodity fetishism* does not generally account for this complexity. Marx deploys the fetishism of the commodity as a kind of performative thing; firstly, because of the distinctly economic language of the commodity, the fetish serves as an arresting rhetorical re-appropriation of the traditional context of the fetish. Secondly, because *commodity fetishism* more or less defines itself in a circular motion, not only is his initial statement of "This I call Fetishism.." which more

or less refers back to the act of production itself, as Marx follows, "This fetishism of commodities has its origin, as the foregoing analysis has already shown, in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them"(168). Thus, Marx's *commodity fetishism* as its own conceptual unit, idea, or even word, is somewhat questionable, as *commodity fetishism* more or less refers back to the commodity's lack of concrete properties or relations, which refers in turn to Marx's general treatment of commodity. Marx refers to the "Fetish character" of the commodity again in the conclusion, but this time uses it to describe the "mode of production itself," stating that "Hence its Fetish character is comparatively easy to be seen through," again demonstrating the different ways Marx engages with the Fetish (169). It could perhaps best be defined as the apparent transformation of the subjective nature of commodities into an objective nature, but this definition, too, seems to demand that the reader return to the specific nature of this transformation. Thus, the tendency to refer to *commodity fetishism* as an abstracted concept rather than a concept within a section (or better yet a concept in a section in a chapter), is a questionable, yet extremely pervasive, practice.

These lesser points aside, Marx's *Capital* and especially the concept of *commodity fetishism* served as a paradigmatic text that reframed and profoundly shaped a whole litany of intellectual and academic discourse. On a most basic level, it served as a foundational text for engaging with the modern capitalist economic reality, offering the commodity—and its fetishism—as a starting place for a whole new way of categorizing and engaging the social, political, and economic. As stated before, Marx's move to establish the commodity as the central object of study in Marxist discourse served as a break—a distinct move towards a new engagement with material/property, — putting forward a new starting place and shaping a new discourse. The impact and influence of Marx's *commodity fetishism* was immediate and sweeping. György Lukács in his 1923 *History and Class Consciousness* takes as his starting point the theory of *commodity fetishism* for the development of his concept of "reification." C*ommodity fetishism* was theoretically central to the Frankfurt School, with Horkheimer and Adorno being the best exemplars with their 1944 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Guy Debord's 1967 *The Society of the Spectacle* applied *commodity fetishism* to the "spectacle" of mass media." In Semiotics, Jean Baudrillard, in his 1968 work

*The System of Objects,* sought to develop and modernize Marx's *commodity fetishism* by shifting away from Marx's privileging of production, to the subject of consumerism — the list could go on… In short, it would not be too bold to say that *commodity fetishism* and its legacy has been one of the more impactful concepts across the social sciences. Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School are more or less *predicated* on Marx's *commodity fetishism* as a starting place. Just as *commodity fetishism* established a new groundwork foundation, it also in turn provoked compelling divergences as the concept was critically engaged, adapted, and reimagined.

That being said, as a project concerned with the nature of branded commodities and identity, we owe Marx a great debt for galvanizing a whole new discourse. However, at the same time, the dominance of Marx's influence necessarily has its own problems, particularly for our project, in its privileging of the analysis of the commodity over the individual. In Marx's initial definition, "A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another" (125). While Marx goes on to disprove the "antisocial" nature of the commodity within his first chapter, showing us that the commodity is actually a socially-constructed thing, he still leaves the individual with almost no agency (125). It is fair to say that Marx is also critical of how the individual is robbed of their agency; however, Marx's overwhelming focus on the commodity over the individual is a significant move with powerful implications— intentional or not. Although Marx is concerned with the commodity as it is connected to human labor, he focuses, however, on the "thing" and not on the individual wanting the "thing." The thing's value is rooted in the social, but Marx is absolutely not interested in talking about *why* the individual wants that thing, or even mapping how the individual precisely *relates* to the thing. Again, the individual is ground under the machinery of the commodity. Furthermore, we cannot uproot this privileging of economy from Marx's larger project of historical materialism and the basic conceptualization of a directional relationship between base and superstructure, with the former constituting the latter. Here, the individual as a product of their economic conditions lacks agency; their relationship with the economic world of commodity, labor, and consumption is a relationship of powerlessness. Thus, despite the fact that Marx is criticizing the conventional notion of the commodity as

the dominating force, he can be accused of having singlehandedly steered the intellectual approach concerning the relationship between the individual and the commodity down one distinct avenue — an approach that overwhelmingly situated the commodity and its consumption over the individual as the dominant force. This is the case because the most popular and widely-engaged treatments of Marx's Commodity and the concept of *commodity fetishism* came directly either from the Marxist tradition, or the Marxist-influenced schools of Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School. True of both academia and broader popular culture, the commodity, mass-culture, consumerism, and the concept of brand, were inevitably tainted from the very beginning. Thus, the legacy of Marx and his *commodity fetishism* set the tone for a dominant discourse on commodity, consumption and brand, as dictatorially acting *upon* the individual.

Thus, *commodity fetishism* and its influence has, in many ways, moved beyond Marx's project and even, as we suggested earlier, the particular way Marx deployed and engaged *commodity fetishism*. That being said, while this framing is necessary to critically engage with Marx's text, it cannot be allowed to overshadow how our project critically engages with *commodity fetishism*. On a most basic level, Marx gives us the language of the commodity, where the previously vague product takes form as a relational item of economic exchange. The language of the commodity clarifies the inherently relational and therefore (primarily) economic nature of the product, not only modernizing the vocabulary of material, but, more importantly, cementing its definition in its nature as a relational thing. Here the commodity and its properties exist in an inherently social dialectic. Here, Marx establishes not only the *possibility*, but also the *necessity*, of critically engaging with the relationship between the social and the material, the individual and the commodity. Marx sets the foundation for *any* discourse concerning either the commodity or the social.  Thus, Marx must be taken as a foundation, something that must be built upon— as the text itself suggests. It seems as important to identify what the Marxian project does *not* do with the commodity as what it *does*. C*ommodity fetishism* identifies the central problem of the commodity as the fact that the use value—the physical properties of the commodity and the human needs it fulfills—is "abstracted" into an exchange value in the framework of the capitalist marketplace. As Marx illustrates,

money takes the form of this equivalence and hides the true equivalence of exchange—labor. As he writes, "Now we know the substance of value. It is labour. We know the measure of its magnitude. It is labour time" (130). Thus, Marx never explicitly bridges this gap between the commodity and its agency, because, for Marx, the commodity as we find it in modern capitalism is so abstracted and alienated that it lacks any substance. The commodity has an agency or an "essential nature," that of its labor; however, the "truth" or "agency" of the commodity is so fully abstracted that it seems to remain only as a theoretical thing.

In the spirit of recognizing Marx's work on the nature of the commodity as a project of grounding or mapping, it demands that we go beyond the confines of the text itself and critically engage with the toolkit Marx provides. Turning to critical questions, *commodity fetishism* and Marx's works more broadly—despite their preeminence—fail to link the commodity to "marketing," even in its earliest stages. Already in 18th-century England, advertisements had become a fixture of English newspapers, and were a trend that progressed rapidly. Branded packaging and public advertising in the form of posters and leaflets became commonplace. France, too, quickly followed suit, with paid advertisements becoming the norm in the marketplace. Thus, while Marx certainly didn't live through the most explosive growth spurts for advertising, he certainly lived in an environment where advertising and other forms of marketing were very pervasive and clearly exerting a significant role over the marketplace, the consumer and material itself. Yet, to my knowledge Marx never once addresses the subject and I can think of no answer as to why. While within *The Commodity* Marx provides a cutting-edge groundwork for engaging the new economic and social realities of industrial capitalism, he never explicitly addresses the bridge between the commodity as a meaningless abstracted thing and the modern world of exchange, where it is re-animated. Thus, in the modern exchange market, Marx shows us that the true meaning of the commodity is alienated and abstracted, yet at the same time the commodity takes on a new life as an exchange value. The commodity, no matter how inauthentic, is still an agentic thing insofar as it is given a cultural and economic meaning. Yet Marx, wholly preoccupied with the abstraction and alienation of the commodity in its most basic economic form, stops short of addressing the alienation of the commodity in a more

modern cultural context. Again, this comes as a surprise, as Marx was very much preoccupied with the specific mechanisms utilized by bourgeois capitalism to influence and control the everyday lives and economic realities of the proletariat working class.

We would argue that *commodity fetishism* is not fashioned for, nor was ever intended to speak to, the reality of marketed and branded commodities—in short, the "modern" post-industrial commodity. This is not an argument that is critical of Marx's project, but rather its interpretations and legacy. The move from the commodity as a fetish, which converts the product into value, **"**It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic" which, "Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language" (ibid. 173). Thus, the product becomes naturalized, ahistorical, and immutable in the eyes of the consumer. As Marx's principal concern is the alienation of individual labour in society, he takes it as a given, and thus does not directly discuss the essential nature of the product and its social function as an object of meaning. Marx's concern with the alienation of man from the product of his labor directly points to his principal concern with the product (and its labor) as a site of meaning-making, but within *commodity fetishism* he does not directly address it, although it appears implicitly and explicitly as a central concern. Thus, as Marx states in the first lines of his chapter on the Commodity, his concern is not in locating where the "want" of the commodity originates, or whether the commodity satisfies these wants; therefore, *commodity fetishism* can only stand as a foundation for the larger questions about the how and why of the commodity. The question of the marketing, branding, and ultimate meaning of the commodity as a social object forces us to move beyond Marx and address a new reality of the commodity.

Marx is astute in identifying that the commodity always speaks to an individual "want;" however, in our modern context we must bifurcate this notion of commodity as it relates to the "want," into product—or commodity—and "brand." The product and its brand are not easily separated; they only exist when paired with one another. A product cannot exist without the externalization of some kind of social identity imposed upon it. A product can exist without an agentic brand, but it will have an identity

or social meaning projected upon it, regardless. This functions as a kind of proto-brand, as it lacks the agency and intentionality inherent in "branding" a product, but retains the essential nature of brand in that it remains as a social meaning paired to a product; a crude analogy: product is the body, and the brand is the soul. You can have a zombie form without a real soul or essence. On a basic working level, a brand requires some degree of intentionality, no matter how nascent or even unconscious. A product without a brand is a product that is mute and inert. The relationship between product and brand is not a relationship where the brand makes meaning from the product where there was previously none, but a relationship that expresses and clarifies the voice of a product. Thus, on the most simplistic level the brand functions as a projective vehicle, an externalization or expression that clarifies—to use Marx's language—how the commodity speaks to the individual's wants. Brand must be thought of principally as a vehicle of externalization. While Marx recognizes that the commodity exists *only* insofar as it speaks to an individual "want," he disregards—or is simply disinterested—in the nature of this relationship. The degree to which a commodity or product satisfies a "human want" is directly related to the efficacy with which the commodity presents itself as capable of fulfilling our want. Modernizing this notion, Marx suggests that a commodity exists only by its property as something that is "wanted," but it is the brand which gives voice to the modern commodity as something that is an object of "want" or "need" or even, as Marx allows, a "fancy." Thus, even Marx, by portraying the commodity as something that exists only through its property as capable of satisfying a human "want," points us towards an investigation of brand.

As Marx argues that the "authentic" and "true" nature of the physical human relationship with the commodity—be it in the form of a "want" or not—is abstracted and alienated, it doesn't appear as much of a leap to suggest that modern marketing seeks to fill this liminal void of meaninglessness that exists between the individual and the commodity. On all fronts, it appears that marketing, specifically giving commodity a brand, seeks to produce the very means that Marx suggests is lost in the obscuring of labor relations. As noted above, if the commodity is already abstracted and fetishized, given a meaning that does not reflect its true use value, then it seems that in marketing a commodity we are fetishizing a fetish. The narrative that the brand constructs around the commodity has no relation to any Marxian qualities of

the commodity itself; the Marxian commodity is an empty thing that inherently requires an intervention. This time it is not an intervention of exchange that equivocates one commodity with another, but a more basic intervention of injecting meaning into the abstracted and alienated commodity. With this added element, we can see yet another layer of alienation and abstraction to Marx's commodity that is a distinctly modern fixture: the commodity is produced, taken from its makers, and thus loses any sense of use value—the first alienation— it enters into the world of exchange—the second alienation—and in this world of rote exchange the commodity's emptiness demands that it be given some sort of meaning—the third alienation— wherein the brand steps in. Marx may never address marketing or brand, but in establishing the rupture of the commodity as it is torn from its mooring and thrust into a world of exchange, Marx creates a void of meaninglessness that must inevitably be filled. From a Marxian angle, as a consumer of alienated commodities, the brand steps in as an antidote to alienation and meaninglessness; it provides a fabricated narrative that endows a meaning and relationship with commodity.

Thus, in my mind, despite the fact that *commodity fetishism* lays the groundwork for any approach that addresses the commodity as an abstracted and socially-mediated thing whose "true nature"—that of its labor, or actual "use value"— does not encapsulate what the commodity truly is, and, therefore, does not directly apply to our modern consumerist society: a modern consumerist society where the delineation between the commodity and the brand is so uncertain that often the commodity itself seems to disappear. This could be articulated as yet another layer of fetishizing, where the commodity and its identity are abstracted beyond the original fetish of the commodity itself. Yet, this would be going beyond Marx. Marx gives us the language of alienation and abstraction; in short, he shows us the void between the use value—the "true" nature of the commodity—and the world where it becomes an empty object of exchange. Marx has provided us a framework for thinking about brand as a thing that appears to fill the void and give meaning to the commodity. If the commodity is abstracted in capitalist exchange, then surely the commodity is doubly abstracted when what meaning it has as a physical object of exchange is subsumed by brand. If Marx's criticism within *commodity fetishism* can be boiled down to its most

simplistic articulation — as it often is —, it is that the perception of social relations involved in production have come to appear not as social relationships between people, but economic relationships of exchange. The commodity transforms the sensual human subjectivity of the thing, into an objective economic "thing" with intrinsic value. The brand is an invention that is directly attributed to the commodity as an object of exchange, but an attribute that seeks to reinvent the sensual social nature of exchange that has been lost. In short, brand seeks to fill the void created by the rupture of social meaning and economic meaning. Thus, existing in this unstable place of rupture, and standing between the consumer and the commodity, we find the alchemy of the brand, which presents the possibility of reinventing the alienated and abstracted commodity.

As much as Marx does to modernize the philosophical and social discourse of the commodity, not to mention his placement of the commodity as a living social and political creature, within this we can still clearly see the fundamental philosophical product that Plato and Aristotle grappled with, and its supreme instability. Again, Marx's most basic conception of the commodity, which appears within the first lines of his great volume *Capital,* is the same fundamental philosophical "definition" of the salient nature of property and its problems — that it exists in a human social world as a "want." Here, from Plato and Aristotle to Marx, the problem of the property exists as a fundamental, as well as a seemingly a-priori, thing. For Plato and Aristotle, the question of property is inseparable from the socio-political realities of human life, just as for Marx the question of the commodity as existing in response to a "want" is a-priori. Just as Plato and Aristotle struggle to identify the essential nature of the problem that is inherent in the relationship between the individual and property, Marx brushes this question aside in a similar fashion in the beginning of *Capital,* writing, "A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference" (125*).* Thus, even across the great expanse of philosophical thought that separates Plato and Aristotle from Marx, the question concerning *why* the product or commodity relationship is such a difficult or inarticulable thing is a constant. Marx may claim that the nature of this "want" makes no difference, although his project sets a

framework that demands that the nature of the "want" is essential. Marx's legacy and the great body of work that sprung from his conception of the commodity—notably the Frankfurt School and the tradition of Critical Theory — concerns itself directly with this "want."  Fundamentally, it is essential to highlight that our journey through the philosophy concerning property is certainly a journey of progression and evolution that culminates, in many ways, in Marx's "explosion" of the commodity; however, we still see that the same fundamental philosophical instabilities and tensions surrounding property survive this long journey—although now they appear in a wholly different light.

**Chapter 5- Synthesis: Philosophy to Brand**

Surveying our journey through some of the most important philosophical thought that concerns property, we see that Marx brings us to a new place, where he offers what is perhaps the clearest and most powerful definition of property, in which the commodity is a thing outside of us that satisfies a human want. Here, in more explicit terms, Marx is referring to the same kind of product that preoccupied Plato and Aristotle, the same properties of the product as a social object possessing a distinct meaning or identity. The essential problem of the commodity seems to be rooted in the inherent mystery; the product or the commodity is a kind of chimera because it is a tangible physical object, with an intangible meaning. This meaning is as fluid as the hearts and minds of the human, the social, the cultural, and the economics, that actively create the commodity. Today, we are either oblivious or we pretend to have made peace with this fact of life, and often pretend that we have "tamed" the commodity, or at least attempted to domesticate its inherent tensions. Now, the emergence of marketing and the language of brand is the major factor. In the modern marketplace, the social meanings of commodities are harnessed with brand in an attempt to control and sculpt the meaning of the commodity in its social context. Companies endeavor to tame the chimera of the commodity by giving it a meaning and identity—a brand. As our project unfolds, we will more directly address this "manipulation" of the commodity through the mechanism of branding, but for now our focus must remain introspective in its treatment of the commodity. What our philosophical journey has yielded is an essential definitional foundation for engaging the commodified property — that it is a thing that exists "outside" of us that we give meaning and value to. We see that

philosophy has identified the salient characteristic of the product or commodity to be its social meaning, its brand. Most importantly, philosophical thought has allowed us to approach the alchemy that is the brand and see its chimeric character — a thing that appears so naturalized and basic in the human imagination, yet simultaneously intangible. The thing, the commodity, has no meaning in and of itself. It is only when it is married with the intangible meanings of the social world that the object becomes something articulable. Thus, philosophy has not only shown us that the true nature of the commodity is found in its social meaning—its brand—, but also the essential instability of this social meaning, this territory within which modern brand marketing attempts to assert itself.

Our journey through the realm of philosophical thought concerning property and the commodity has established an essential foundation for our project: the inherent instability of the relational space that brand seeks to occupy, between commodity and consumer/producer. The dominant understanding of what brand does must be destabilized in order to make space for a brand framework that engages with instability. Yet, before proceeding, to engage this instability, we must establish a cursory working definition of brand. It is essential to our project that we recognize that the vocabulary of brand is a relatively recent conceptualization of material (commodity/product or otherwise) identity. As we have already presented, product—especially commodified material—has always had brand, that is, it has always had some kind of identity or socially constructed meaning attached to it. A thing is never just a thing; a material thing always has a dialectical relationship between itself and the social world. The material thing is neither fully constructed nor constructive of its social meaning; rather, it is always situated within a dialectical relationship. Thus, in the most general sense, brand is simply the most modern articulation and conceptualization of the identity and meaning of the material thing, albeit one that is distinctly tied to the advent of the commodity. This must not come at the expense of the essentiality of analyzing brand as a new and modern conceptualization of material identity; however, it is of the utmost importance that we recognize that brand in its precursory forms has always existed as a fixture in the social and phenomenological experience of being human in a material world. What is important here is that material must ultimately be *given* meaning. Even though material has its own nature

that works to construct this meaning, ultimately we see the social project of human existence as making and giving meaning to the world—an inherently unstable undertaking. Thus, to engage with the material world is to engage with brand insofar as brand is the embodiment of this projection, or externalization, of meaning-making. This is not to say that this meaning-making is analogous with brand, but that brand exists within this broader framework. We must acknowledge that brand, as it functions, exists only within commodified objects or products, and thus the vocabulary of brand comes into being only in the company of the commodity.

In the modern marketplace, brands are created and "given"—marketed—to the consumer, who in turn create and give meaning to the brand—a relationship that necessarily comes with tensions, "slippages," and re-articulation. The core idea is that brand offers leverage in the marketplace that corporations and other actors have realized is powerful, and which simultaneously allows them access into the consumer's world and values. This is a modern development, a modern destabilization. In the simplest terms, the construction of brand is an attempt to create a narrative that is meaningful on multiple levels and for multiple stakeholders (customers, marketers, corporations, etc.). On the most basic level, brand is a dimensionalized essence or identity that attempts to encode an evocative range of associations, promises, and imagery which illuminate and extol *both* the product and the user. On a higher and more emotional level, the brand offers and seeks to create a *relationship*; it attempts to create a sphere of shared relevance. Here, the brand functions as the locus for the relationship between material product and the consumer. We do not innately have "relationships" with products per se — candy bars, beverages, cellphones, or cars. Yes, we recognize we need them, but it is at the level of the brand that the locus of the relational bond is created and solidified. Mastercard and Visa are absolutely identical in terms of their product features; it falls to brand to create and communicate meaningful essence and identity differences. Here, the brand presents itself as the gatekeeper between the product and the consumer; the brand makes or transforms a material thing into a branded product, into something recognizable and articulable. The brand helps augment the product into an object with an identity complete with associations, promises and imagery that are consumed just as the product is. In turn, the branded object offers an experience, utility

and the fulfillment of a want. Here, brand gives voice to products, while also giving voice to the consumer. Thus, as with any material, brand is constructed by, and constructive of, its consumers. This returns us to the fundamental instability of the brand: that it exists only as a relational thing. Just as a rote commodity, such as gold, has a rich and layered history of a cultural meaning that is, in many ways, a constant renegotiation of relationship, be it social or economic, the brand functions in a similar way. A commodity's brand is never a stable thing; rather, it is constantly created and recreated by the relationship between brand and the consumer. It is in this tension and instability — this ever-shifting, complex, and layered web of relationships between brands and consumers — that we find the definition of what brand *is*.

**SECTION II- Anthropology of Brand: Situating the Brand**


**Chapter 1- A Brief Journey to the Modern Brand**

Having established and traced the historic philosophical engagement with individual and commodity, we were led to a definition of brand as existing within—and because of— the void between commodity and consumer. We were also introduced to the conception of the modern brand as a vehicle for identity and meaning existing in the unstable relationship between individual and consumer. However, while we have the beginnings of a framework, we have only begun to understand and engage brand. Our previous section ended by positing that the true nature of brand must be found only in its dynamic relational engagement, calling for our project to ground itself in the particularities of the brand relationship in order to understand it. In short, our philosophical investigation of brand has led directly to the necessity of a grounded anthropologically-ethnographic and analytical treatment of brand. The movement of this section brings us closer to a more intimate engagement with brand, with each step revealing a new characteristic. Beginning with establishing our project's methodological basis, we move to engage critically with the discourse surrounding brand, before responding with our own formulation of brand both in its theoretical and ethnographically-grounded forms.

As previously mentioned, the language of brand, as well as its proliferation as a fixture of the commodity, is a distinctly modern thing. Most economic historians connect the emergence of brand to the rise of the mass-produced factory goods during the Industrial Revolution, where individual consumers had, previously, only been familiar with primarily locally-produced goods. As mass-produced goods increasingly found themselves competing in the territory previously dominated by the familiar and local products, the brand—complete with packaging and advertising— emerged as a way to convince consumers that these mass-produced products were as trustworthy as the locally-produced goods which they were accustomed to (Arons). The first exemplars of this come from packaged-goods manufacturers: Pearl's soap, Campbell's Soup, Coca-Cola, Aunt Jemima, Quaker Oats, etc. (ibid.). In short, while not all historians use the language of "trust"—although it is common—, these new foreign products could not

outright compete with the local product because they lacked anything that would differentiate themselves from the local products which consumers trusted and understood (ibid). Here we see playing out exactly the phenomenon that we discussed in relation to Marx—the brand must fill the void with meaning. The meaning, and thus favorability, of the locally-produced product was self-evident; only through attempting to construct an analogous narrative of meaning via brand could the mass-produced product prevail. The relationship of the consumer to the locally-produced goods was apparent, an age-old economic fact; however, the mass-produced product had no such intrinsic relationship, and thus attempted to construct a branded narrative and meaning as something that could act as a relational object. Pearl's soap is heralded as being one of the first fully-fledged brands. Thomas J. Barratt joined Pearl's in 1865, and could be said to be the first "brand manager" (ibid.). Pearl's soap fulfilled important components of marketing that remain as relevant as ever: product recognition — Pearl's soap was the first translucent soap, differentiating it from all other soaps sold at the time — and identity, combining its distinctive visual identity with a slogan-based advertising campaign that positioned the soap as a kind of status symbol. Most importantly, it may have been the first brand that can be identified as recognizing the power in leveraging status relating to brand; Pearls's 1865 advertising tapped into a racist cultural narrative, including the now iconic—and at that time much copied—ad where a black boy is "cleaned" into a white boy (ibid.). Explicitly leveraging racist notions exemplifies this elitist brand message: cultivated people with taste and status choose Pearl's soap.

While Pearl's may have been ahead of its time, by all accounts it seems that by the mid-1940's manufacturers began to recognize that consumers were developing actual relationships with their products — relationships that existed both in the cultural and individual sense (ibid.). In the 1950's, companies such as Procter and Gamble, General Foods, and Unilever, were responsible for catalyzing the brand as a business element of the company by creating the role of "brand manager" (ibid.). What is notable here is the fact that it took a fairly significant amount of time for companies to recognize the utility, or even the necessity, of attempting to manage their brands. What this tells us is that it was the consumer, more than the company itself, who elevated the importance of the brand. Certainly the brand in its earliest form was

an attempt to create an identity capable of competing with locally-produced products, but what elevated brand to something that needed to be managed was the slow realization that consumers were creating their own meanings and relationships with products on their own. Thus, in some ways, it was the consumer who took the first bite of the forbidden apple, even if the corporation was the snake. Companies then realized that brand was a valuable component of their offering in and of itself, something that could not simply be left to the minds of the consumers. From this point forward, we witness an explosion of brand, especially in the 1990's, as retailers realized that brand could be leveraged with more acuity and to great effect. This was essentially the move from the brand as a singular thing, such as a commodity or company, to brand in a more general sense (ibid). Retailers followed the example set by the packaged-goods manufacturers, and created marketing departments. Moreover, retailers realized that, by creating and leveraging the brands of the products they sold, they could not only make more money but also improve their own retail brand's value (ibid).

Fast-forward to the 21$^{st}$ century: we've developed from a notion of brand as attributable to a single company and not much more, to the explosion of brand as a thing to be leveraged at every opportunity—the average Western consumer sees 3,000 brand messages a day. Today, brand is more prolific than ever. Even within the theory of marketing, brand retains a special ring to it, even as it is the subject of hundreds of business-related books, and forms an essential part of the core component of the modern curriculum of marketing education. The word resists simplistic categorization, which is exactly what makes it so enigmatic and fascinating. Yet, while the business world continues to delve into the practical and superficial applications of brand, the other, deeper and more elusive, side of the brand remains—with some exceptions— largely ignored. Here, our project deploys the dichotomy of deep vs. superficial, primarily to denote the degree to which the intimate and situated agentic individual consumer is engaged, or not. As we come to see, it is easy to treat brand as a superficial theoretical phenomena without any real depth in considering the individual consumer's context.

**Chapter 2- Methodology and an Introduction to the Focus Group**

In Urban and Koh's 2013 article *Ethnographic Research on Modern Business Corporations*,

perhaps the only anthropological attempt at an ethnography of the corporation, the first line begins by stating, "Ethnographic research approaches modern business corporations from two directions: from the inside, as if corporations were analogous to the small-scale societies anthropologists traditionally studied; and, from the outside, as actors affecting and transforming the world" (Urban & Koh, 140). Here, my project is deeply concerned with an ethnographic approach towards the corporate, as brand often "subsumes" corporate identity (for example, people don't often link the brand Pepsi to its company, Pepsico). Thus, I fall within neither of these approaches, but rather rest somewhere in the middle. In my project, I draw upon a unique perspectival role as an academic who is seeking to understand brand on an intellectual and academic level through my experiences, as well as the learning that I have attained as a brand strategist who has worked with the marketing of brands in the world of business. Our anthropological project is an amalgamation of these two approaches to brand: an individual who studies the discourse and theory of the brand at a distance, and the marketer who actively participates in the creation, interpretation, and management of brand in a situated business context. In fact, it is important to state that our project is possible only through this amalgamation, for only by engaging the anthropological discourse of brand with personal experience and analysis are we able to engage brand on a deeper level, and produce a new analytical framework for understanding and engaging brand.

For the past three years I have worked in the world of marketing as an independent consultant on both a national and international scale for Fortune 500 corporations that range from media companies to packaged goods brands. In this capacity I have worked on projects that, broadly, seek to strategically position or reposition a brand: projects that examine the landscape of the marketplace, looking for a potential openings for consumer needs, wants and desires, as well as more general projects that seek to understand and analyze the consumer in relation to specific themes. In short, while "strategic brand positioning" may be the simplest description of the work, it omits the significant difference in foci that is unique to each specific project, as well as the kind of "learning" that is sought. On a basic level, the goal is always to try to understand the consumer, largely by inviting both rational and imaginal framing exercises to draw out their perceptions and attitudes. In the most general sense, the work does not begin

with a question like "How do you use X in your everyday life," but rather, understanding (on a necessarily cursory level) how the consumer understands and sees themselves in the current cultural moment. To understand the role of specific commodities and brands, one must first have some sense of who the consumer is as an individual, or how they represent themselves as an individual.

My field work is essentially comprised of the body of experience and observations I have accumulated in my work; my field notes are the hundreds of pages of notes I have taken, as well as the deliverable presentations and reports I have contributed to. Admittedly, not all of this work was done while I was actively working on a particular project, yet taken together they contribute equally to the body of knowledge I have to draw upon. This is, of course, not fieldwork in the traditional sense; a critic could argue that it lacks the required depth and intimacy of engagement entailed in fieldwork. While I will admit to some unorthodoxy, these claims are easily refuted. If fieldwork aims to come to a deep understanding that encompasses an insider's perspective, I would argue that, on all points, the work that I have done approaches both a deep and insider perspective in a uniquely powerful way. While projects have their own specific aims and demand that we deliver our employer a report that fulfills the "learning" goals for the project set forth, it is not as if my deeper brand "learning" does not carry over, cumulatively, into every other project. In fact, in our work it is imperative that each project be as specific as it must be, while being simultaneously grounded in a broader field of deep and accumulated cultural knowledge of how brand works in different stratified consumer markets, more generally. If it were anything otherwise, it would be akin to starting at zero with every project. Thus, while it may be true that any single two-week project could not be considered fully-fledged fieldwork, when taken as a whole it does represent a significant body of experience accumulated through three years of work, which is undeniably an "anthropological" fieldwork of brand and consumer relations.

Again, the methodological context of this project is the analysis of experience, observation, notes, correspondences, and reports, across three years of work. Here, our object of study is not a stable, situated thing; rather, brand is the opposite. Certainly one could take a more traditional fieldwork approach to marketing and brand and embed themselves within a specific brand or corporation, or write

an historical account of how a certain product or brand came to cultural prominence. But all of these approaches will yield only a limited understanding of how a particular brand operates in one context. I do not mean to diminish this kind of approach; certainly there is significant learning about brand that can be gleaned. However, to attempt to investigate and understand brand as it operates in a more general or universal way, instead of a singular and specific way, we must find a research methodology that can match the chimeric, dynamic, and atemporal nature of brand. As a key site of ethnographic research, the methodology of the focus group is uniquely positioned to address these questions.

The focus group has long been a fixture of modern market research, seen by corporations to be a unique site to theory-craft brand and product. While individual marketers and marketing agencies do carry out what is most often called a "home visit," where an individual or a family is observed in their own space interacting with a branded product, the focus group remains the prominent tool of market research, at least on the qualitative side. This is due to the prevailing belief that it is possible to gain intimate knowledge of the consumer through a series of tailored focus groups; in short, the focus group is seen to provide the highest return on investment for marketers looking to better understand their consumers. As Kratz writes in his 2010 article *In and Out of Focus*—the only anthropological article I could find that directly addresses and analyses the phenomena of the focus group—an article about the focus group phenomena using several development projects as case studies, Kratz writes "They [focus groups] are seen as a source of information to help interpret and explain quantitative surveys, a means of eliciting statements and narratives about personal experiences and attitudes, and a discovery procedure to identify recurrent themes and idioms relevant to a research topic. Part of the battery of "rapid methods" for evaluation and assessment, focus groups are both faster to implement and less expensive than ethnography…" (1). It must be noted that, while there are many different forms of ethnographic research, in my project when I refer to "ethnography" I am referring to the specific tradition of cultural-anthropology, ethnographic fieldwork that insists on an intimate embeddedness of the anthropologist and their analysis. Kratz also identifies the various frictions within anthropology's engagement with the focus group as an ethnographic method, going as far as to separate the focus group from traditional ethnography

even while illuminating their shared qualities and goals. He writes, "Focus groups and ethnographic research alike are grounded epistemologically in communication and social interaction—they produce knowledge through various kinds of discursive engagement and other modes of communication" (ibid 2). While Kratz belies mainstream anthropology's reluctance to engage with the focus group or even allow it to be considered under the umbrella of ethnography, within his article he nonetheless calls for anthropology, as a field, to engage critically with the focus group in the same way as any other ethnographic sites of knowledge production. Writing on the reflexive turn in anthropology, "But critical attention at the time seldom is extended to reexamining communicative structures and processes embedded in basic methods and the ways they might shape knowledge production. Regarding research methods simply as ready-made tools belies the uncertainty and openness intrinsic to qualitative research and to the production of ethnographic knowledge through communicative interaction" (ibid 2). Thus, because the essential "material" of our project is a direct product of the focus group, it is essential that— as Kratz highlights—we engage the focus group not as simply a ready-made tool but rather a unique site of knowledge production that can be understood and analyzed ethnographically.

An important distinction must be made here; Kratz, as well as others who write about the focus group, are attempting to construct a generalizable model of how the focus group operates across different contexts. While this has undeniable value, it also contains an inherent tension. Kratz is attempting to analyze and assess the focus group in an anthropological context with the explicit goal of revealing some sort of essential character inherent in the focus group as a methodology, while at the same time acknowledging that the structure and process of each focus group has its own unique context. This stands in opposition to our project, as mentioned above, as our work cannot begin to engage analytically with the focus group beyond the specific *way* that my company conducts focus groups. Illustrating more tension between our projects, Kratz cites another researcher on the business side of the focus group, who writes, "Marketing literature is clear that focus group participant structure incorporates hierarchy: 'One of the main reasons that focus groups work … is that the moderator is the *authority figure'*" (7). Here, while I cannot speak for other marketers conducting focus groups, I can say that the way our company conducts

focus groups stands in direct opposition to this. From the start, our focus groups are designed to subvert authority from the individual moderator "leading" the discussion and disperse it among the participants. As I will later establish, the success of our focus groups are predicated on the individual participant seeing themselves as an authoritative voice, an expert who is specifically *selected* and *paid* to share their experiences and ideas. In a final blow, Kratz goes on to state that the focus group operates on "two assumptions:" first, that individuals are more willing to speak if they recognize shared experiences with their peers, and second, that individuals will talk more readily with "strangers." These assumptions by themselves are not necessarily untrue or problematic, but what is problematic is the premise that the focus group can operate on just *two* generalizable "assumptions,"when in reality there are many more (8). Kratz chooses two assumptions about how people speak and how they convey information, while excluding all the other important elements that make the focus group possible. We focus on Kratz's statement not because it is particularly problematic itself, but instead because it emphasizes the point that generalizing the focus group and how it works is itself inherently problematic. While there are many other examples, more of which could be engaged through Kratz's article that could serve to illustrate this point, we quickly see the problem of generalizing the success of the focus group as a productive site of knowledge to just a few elements—the opposite of a holistic engagement with the focus group as a complex social site—, which is exactly why each context of the focus group must be analyzed in its own right, and why it is of the utmost importance for our project that we establish a firm break from how focus groups are "thought" to work, and engage and analyze the unique way we *ourselves* conduct focus groups.

Any project we conduct first and foremost revolves around the focus group. This means that the project begins and ends with the focus group. It begins by establishing certain "markets" or locations where focus groups will be conducted, sometimes for the purpose of stratifying different generalizable cultural values and social characteristics associated with any location (for example, a consumer in Atlanta will, in general, yield a different outlook and set of values than, say, Seattle), and sometimes because a particular brand is doing well in one "market" and not well in another. After determining markets, which is implicitly related to determining the kind of individuals that we want for a focus group, as well as the

relative strength or weakness of the brands in a given location, it is explicitly discussed in the terms of what different stratifications we want to employ, ranging from ethnicity, income, gender, and other psychographics, while also selecting specific groups of consumers based on their level of "brand engagement." For example, if a brand was doing poorly we wouldn't simply want to speak with individuals who are brand "rejecters," but rather we would attempt to get a survey of individuals who were "acceptors," "switchers" or highly "loyal" to a specific brand. The former stratification of ethnicity, income, and gender often relates to who is the "target consumer," and, again, groups would be constructed to survey these different levels of consumer; for example, if a brand is targeted at go-getter millennials, yet the data tells us that there is also a significant consumer base outside of this target, we would, of course, want to speak to and understand this consumer also. So, after the markets are selected, and targets identified and clearly articulated, the project begins by constructing a "screener," which is a sort of questionnaire that will filter potential participants and allow us to construct the specific stratified groups we have determined we would need to engage. After this screener is finalized, the actual work of collecting and organizing individuals is relegated to market research service companies (such as the aptly named company, Fieldwork) who take over the focus group side of the project. While our company is working on background research and constructing a "vision" for how to approach the particular problem or question that our employer—the company—has brought us on board to address, the market service companies conduct their work.

To paint a general picture, when the project officially begins we simply show up at the location where we are greeted with the liaison who has been in charge of the selection, construction and management of groups, and taken to our room where representatives of the employing company will often join us. In the U.S., the typical focus group facility has a relatively uniform design. It is usually a large office or floor, centrally located in a city. Clients enter through a specified and different door and approach the front desk in a large waiting room where there are often participants of other focus groups waiting. Most often they are preoccupied with their phones as a default, just as they would be in any other situation where they might find themselves in a waiting room filled with strangers. In a focus group

facility, there are usually multiple rooms of varying sizes, often denoted with names such as the "yellow room" or sometimes just with numbers. It is certainly possible to get lost in these maze-like offices and accidentally stumble into the wrong room and be greeted by the confused gaze of a small cluster of people in suits, so I always make a point to memorize the name of our room. The viewing room itself is a fairly uniform thing — a soundproof multi-tiered set of desks where the client and marketing team can observe the focus groups, unnoticed, via a wall of one-way glass looking into a conference room where the focus groups are conducted.

In my experience, what really distinguishes one research facility from another is the quality of the snacks they provide; after listening to 8 hours of back-to-back focus groups it's nice to actually eat a full-sized bag of M&Ms and not just the small "fun-size" bags, an experience reminiscent of youthful memories of Halloween. I certainly remember which facilities are less "generous" with their provisions. The actual experience of the focus group is another fairly universalizable one: you greet the employee representatives—sometimes you know them well and sometimes you're just meeting for the first time. Pleasantries and small talk about travel often next ensue, "Oh how was your flight?" "Where are you staying tonight?," which eventually leads into a discussion of the current project, past projects, the goings on at "Corporate" (more often than not we have a long-standing history with a particular client); however, after these initial pleasantries, things are generally informal and "hands off."

The focus group, especially in its early iterations, is generally a messy and unwieldy affair. Most often they are two-hour sessions and usually 3-4 of these are conducted in a single day. I don't blame clients for their detachment or boredom that I even sometimes share. In fact, there is an unspoken rule: I sit in the very front of the backroom right behind the glass, allowing clients to sit behind and above me. I assume that this enables the client to be more comfortable doing whatever they want to do without fear of any judgment. As the focus group begins and the participants shuffle in and find their seats, in the back room the clients observing the groups open their laptops and, depending on hierarchy, some will openly write emails or even check Facebook, while others will do the same serendipitously, and still others will feign attentive listening and watching. While there are certainly clients who seem to be "just along for the

ride," at the other side of the spectrum many clients are deeply engaged, a result of their company's

embodying the mantra that understanding and learning to respond to the customer is essential to success.

And since most brand marketers work in teams and often stay with a single brand for an extended period,

they accumulate a considerable and often quite nuanced understanding around the brands in their "care."

Still, engaged or no, the clients are essentially paying us for the final "report," which is the distillation of

our interpretations of everything that is said and not said across every focus group – our "deliverable."

The final written report is then precisely tailored and positioned to speak to the specific questions or

needs of the client's project; the resulting "learnings" and recommendations must be made actionable for

a massive corporate marketing team.

This paints a general picture of the whole affair from one side of the glass. The scale of focus

groups as an endeavor is now a multi-million dollar industry with millions and millions of dollars being

poured into this kind of "qualitative research" in the U.S. and abroad. If anything, most brand managers

spend more time observing focus groups than almost anything else. With the explosion of the focus group

phenomena, it makes sense that there is a sort of "universal" way the focus group seems to work as a

practice. Of course there are always exceptions: the occasional client who is extremely involved to the

point of appearing controlling, or the client who asks for us to include a question or "go after" a theme or

topic for some reason or other—and of course, we entertain these requests even when they are obviously

off-base. Externally, the focus group facilities in São Paulo, Bogotá, and Lima are quite different from

those in the U.S., and not just because they don't usually have M&M's.  In terms of how the focus groups

play out on the inside, it's none too different from the U.S. other than the fact that the small talk is a little

bit more difficult for me—my Spanish needs work.  On the whole, the focus group as a happening is a

surprisingly predictable thing, not unlike any other part of the inner workings of the "business world."

The real substance of the focus group and the knowledge it produces in any project occurs not in the back

room, or in the interface between our company and our employer, but on the other side of the glass, the

focus group, where the actual substance of brand knowledge is created and interpreted—a place we will

return to in order to ground our analysis of brand.

**Chapter 3-Analyzing and Engaging the Literature of Brand**

Having positioned the methodological dimensions of our project and our analysis thereof, we find ourselves tellingly in a position where the operation of brand appears most clearly when it is constructed in a relational way to its consumer. Reframing our projects's central argument, we need to begin again at a foundational level when we engage brand; we need to focus on the particular mechanisms through which brand engages, and is engaged by, the consumer, in order to locate and reconstruct a framework for understanding and engaging brand. Going forward to further this inquiry, the natural way to proceed seems to be to examine the discourses and literature that have engaged with brand and the themes that surround it.

To linger for just another moment in the world of business, returning to our roots, at face value there is a relatively simple answer to our earlier question "What is brand?" — a definition that can be found reiterated in any business or marketing book. This definition states that, on the most basic level, the brand helps distinguish one product from another. However, while this may be one of the things that brand does, this isn't what the brand *is,* but rather a rote description of one of the things brand *can* do. Similarly, even taken to the higher level of brand identity, we are only given brand in its verb form. Kotler's prolific textbook *Principles of Marketing,* states that the brand's identity delivers four levels of meaning: attributes — essentially, qualities the corporation wishes to be associated with; benefits — which serve to communicate these attributes on an emotional and experiential level; values — a central "core" character of a brand that serves as a beacon for individuals who may share the same value; and personality — where the brand identity can be described as if it were a person (Kotler et al: 2009). In short, collectively, these four elements of brand identification can deliver a powerful cultural and strategic message—again, no surprise there. Here, even on the more technical level, there is an overwhelming preoccupation with what brand *is* and what it *does,* but without any interest or explanation as to *how* or *why* brand works. Despite the fact that the vast majority of academic discourse related to the brand takes place in business-centric books, journals**,** and debates, it seems unlikely that we will find anything of particular value for our project in this business discourse.

Turning then to anthropological and other social-science texts that engage the themes relating to brand, we must begin by overviewing the current discourse before identifying what frameworks of thought, or elements of these frameworks, might further our project. The sub-field of economic anthropology—especially as it intermingles with the anthropology of development—is the anthropological discourse that, in my limited reading experience, most directly addresses the themes of consumption and the commodity in an increasingly globalized marketplace. In part a response to the increasing number of trained anthropologists entering the corporate world, a relatively recent development in this field has been to turn towards the corporation as an ethnographic site or, more generally in my experience, as something economic anthropologists, especially, should be concerned with.  Aihwa Ong's 1987 book *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia,* is often attributed for inspiring fellow anthropologists to turn towards a focus on the corporate. The themes of her work center around power, labor, and gender against the backdrop of a resistance to the ideology of capitalism. However, this turn towards the corporate that constitutes economic anthropology is less of an analysis of the *actual* ways the corporate, as an object of analysis, constitutes a study in its own right, but rather a focus on how the corporate functions as a site that structures labor. In many economic anthropology articles and ethnographies, corporate is conflated with the factory or another site of the creation or distribution of product. The true nature and analysis of the actual operation of the corporate is rarely interrogated; rather, the corporation itself becomes an all-encompassing thing—which is not only an abstraction that conceals the true nature of how the corporate operates, failing to offer any substantive analysis of the corporate.

Often ethnographers will identify a corporate presence or element without further interrogation. They see that a Pepsi-badged truck is unloading cans of Pepsi into a village and to them, this is the corporation. In reality, and this is particularly true in the developing world, Pepsi owns neither that truck, nor even those cans of Pepsi, and they certainly have nothing to do with this particular individual's actions of unloading these cans of Pepsi. This relates to a central problem — the conflation of brand and advertising—that I would argue is a blatant misunderstanding and a problem that is prevalent not just in

brand-centric anthropology, but in many other fields within anthropology—with a nod to economic anthropology. The brand seeks to project its message via advertising, but advertising does not simply lead back to the brand, nor does it constitute its substance. This harkens back to Ong, and how her piece, which is centered around a factory, is regarded as the "beginning" of a corporate-centric anthropology, while in reality the corporation is likely neither owned, nor directly had anything to do with this factory or any of their factories. The same is true today. Nike doesn't own any of the factories that produce their products or have anything to do with this production-side of their business; they simply provide some other company with a design and a quota. Thus, the conflation of factory and corporate is inherently problematic. The only thing that connects Pepsi as a corporation to an individual unloading cans of Pepsi is the distinct Pepsi logo—the brand.

It is unequivocally not my intention to negate the value of economic anthropology's articles and fieldwork. Economic anthropology and its articles and ethnographers undoubtably produce one of the most valuable discourses related to the spirit of our project, in that it is directly concerned with consumption and the commodity. And, while I believe that it erroneously leaves out a consideration of the role of brand in analyzing consumption, it nonetheless moves us closer to understanding the relationship between culture and commodity. As brand, in all its forms, becomes an ever-increasing and more influential fixture of everyday life, and as globalization increasingly and overtly moves brand into the developing communities that economic anthropologists typically study, it is my belief that brand will inevitably force itself into the discourse of economic anthropology.

While the discourse of economic anthropology, which seemed like the place we would most-likely find an approach that engaged brand, has left us disappointed, there is one exception. While Mazzerella is not an economic anthropologist, he is a political anthropologist who focuses on globalization and mass-media, and his writing in his 2003 ethnography *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India,* is deeply grounded in the economic. While framed as a "globalization study," Mazzerella's project is based on an examination of the cultural politics of mass consumerism in the globalized marketplace, through an examination and analysis of advertising in India.

As Mazzerella writes in the close of his introduction, "This is a book about the people who make advertising. I theorize the practice of advertising as a kind of public cultural production, centered on a distinctive form of commodity production, the production of commodity images" (4).

Ultimately, Mazzerella's text is the singular ethnography that directly engages with brand, and although the subject of brand itself is not the major component of his project, he dedicates 60ignificant time to engage and analyze brand, and even to further a conceptual notion of brand. In his thesis in Chapter 6, Mazzerella touches on the way that commodities attempt to attach intimacy and "concretion" to the exchange relationship, closing his paragraph, "What I am arguing is that branding is the way that manufacturers, and the advertising agencies that serve them, attempt to appropriate or preempt this intimacy so as to realize higher levels of profit" (186). Reading this work, from the language, it seems almost as though Mazzerella isn't particularly well-versed in the brand discourse of the consumer/brand binary. His language seems hesitant at times, making a larger claim before retreating to the undeniably weak statement of his thesis, which is essentially the recapitulation of a blatant truism. However, this initial thesis does little justice to the eloquent and provocative claims Mazzerella later makes. Mazzerella re-appropriates the language of "source identity" as an intimate personality with a look and feel, as well as a "voice" of brand. Critically, Mazzeralla writes, "…the desired demonstration of the efficacy of the articulated brand was the consumer's sense of being singled out—or, in Althusserian terms, "interpellated" (203). Corroborating this with a key ethnographic example, he writes, "Now that the physical product has happened," the agency manager told his client, "the aim is to create in the consumer a sense of 'it talks to me!'" (ibid 218).

Just from these small samples, I am confidant that Mazzeralla would have found himself in a metaphorical goldmine for deeply understanding and analyzing brand. The tragedy of Mazzerella's text for our project is that, although there are incredible moments of insight and clairvoyance relating to brand, unlike us, Mazzerella is not really writing about, or focusing on, brand. Rather, for him, brand is just a small piece to help us better understand his greater project of engaging the cultural politics of mass consumerism in a globalized marketplace. From here, Mazzerella reverts to recapitulating classic

articulations of brand personality, based primarily off of David Aker's work; in short, much of Mazzerella's writing on brand appears as a kind of review of the things *other* prominent thinkers have written, with little of his own interpretation (189). Ultimately, when Mazzerella departs from this kind of review to construct his own interpretation of the brand relationship, while admitting an important relationality, he reverts to a conception where the corporate and its brand and advertising are the dominating actor over the consumer. As he writes on the commodity and its brand, "Yet, at the same time, it is crucial that these "spaces"[brands] do not appear to be artificially *imposed* by corporate interests; rather, their content and meaning—while necessarily remaining the product and property of the corporation—should appear simply as a means by which consumers' existing identities and aspirations may be expressed and enacted" (ibid. 191). Thus, while we follow Mazzeralla, and even applaud him for being the first anthropologist we have read who sees the brand and the consumer in relational terms in an ethnographic context, it becomes increasingly clear that Mazzeralla's conception of this relationship is limited to the "appearance" of agency, rather than any actual "authentic" relational agency between brand and consumer. Despite the fact that he attests that it is in the companies' interest that the consumers feel they are expressing themselves through brand, he is still only indirectly addressing the question of agency by noting that companies believe consumer "self expression" is important; he is only approaching this through a secondary source, again content to accept the second-hand beliefs and sentiments of the marketers. This becomes increasingly overt as the chapter draws to a close, with Mazzeralla writing, "Branding attempts to impose onto the impersonality of commodity exchange and the appearance of unique emotionally textured relationships. At the same time, while ceaselessly referring to the interests of the consumer, it nevertheless in the final instance depends upon asserting total corporate authority over this process" (195). While Mazzeralla is insightful in his recognition of how brand operates on a basic level, and how to leverage this with a focus on the intimate relationality, he, ironically, ultimately strips the consumer of their agency not only through his disinterest in the subjectivity of the consumer experience, but, as he makes clear above in an almost authoritarian tone, "it nevertheless in the final instance depends upon asserting total corporate authority over this process" (ibid. 195) Although it

initially appears as though Mazzeralla is constructing a notion of brand as a thing that is mediated by the consumer and brand, he takes an almost authoritarian tone when he demands that the "final instance" depends on the assertion of total corporate authority and control over this process.

The case of Mazzeralla's engagement with brand is even more curious because, at times, he seems to contradict himself, again appearing hesitant and unsure. In one of his most insightful moments, he writes, "Of course it goes without saying that, in the rounds of everyday life, consumers—individually and collectively—construct all kinds of intimate and idiosyncratic relationships with the products they consume (ibid 186). Reading this, my heart leapt momentarily, realizing that Mazzeralla was articulating one of the core arguments of my project — that brands are misunderstood, re-articulated, and repurposed—yet he never mentions this character of brand or actually approaches and engages the consumer in their everyday life. However, with this insight, Mazzeralla seems to directly contradict his later assertion that branding depends on the assertion of complete authority over the relationship inherent in branding; after all, how can the corporate have complete authority while also recognizing that their consumers constantly construct their own unique relationships with brands they consume. This tension reaches a climax in Mazzeralla's conclusion, where he writes, "…consumerism is offered as a unique means of self-transformation, even liberation….from the world that is," ending the chapter with, "The gift of the now (would be) global brand promises to affirm the cultural particularity of consumers while at the same time liberating them from *mere* particularity, in short, to solve the key problem of modern public life: the tension between embodiment and universality" (210). Here, Mazzeralla is making the leap from the individual particularity of consumption, which he cites as a "unique means of self-transformation, even liberation," to the larger cultural particularity in the context of globalization. Here the "gift" of the global brand promises to retain the cultural particularity of the consumer, while also liberating them and allowing them to enter the newly-globalized world; this is explicit when he refers to the tension between embodiment and universality. This utopian notion of brand as self-transformation and liberation extends not only to the individual, but, in one fell swoop, Mazzeralla posits that it extends also to the "culture," that the "global" brand promises to affirm cultural particularity while also liberating consumers from

*mere* particularity. While Mazzeralla seems to have done his research, as he does, at length, cite the eminent marketer David Aaker, he has seemingly not reconciled his utopian project with the basic marketing concept that, as your consumer market grows, your marketing strategy must grow with it and appeal to an ever larger, and inherently "different," consumer. The proposition of a "global brand," which has existed for decades in marketing discourse, has always centered around cultural "universals" rather than the "particularity" that Mazzeralla is theorizing. Mazzarella, as the sole anthropologist to tackle the brand ethnographically, deserves great credit in coming the closest to painting a dimensionalized portrait of the consumer/brand relationship. However, what ultimately fails in Mazzarella's engagement with brand is not just his idealistic utopian vision — which we see to have fundamental flaws — but, on a deeper level, while his project is centered around the corporate, he fails to directly engage the role of the individual consumer, even while admitting its significance. And lastly, the moment he writes "Branding attempts to impose onto the impersonality of commodity exchange and the appearance of unique emotionally textured relationships. At the same time, while ceaselessly referring to the interests of the consumer, it nevertheless in the final instance depends upon asserting total corporate authority over this process" (ibid 195). It becomes abundantly clear that the agency and significance of the consumer "enacting their true selves" through brand isn't any legitimate agency, but rather the appearance of agency, which Mazzarella seems to affirm when he writes that brands depend on the "appearance of emotionally textured relationships," while the actual power of the brand comes from the assertion of "complete corporate authority" (195).

Turning now to the non-ethnographic anthropological discourse of brand, there is plenty of theoretical material to work through. While the discourse is dominated by published articles, there are individual anthropologists who focus specifically on consumption and the world of "things." It is important to take a moment to note that, as I write this, there is not a single anthropologist who could be identified as deeply interested or engaged in the study of the brand— I hope the reader finds this as astonishing as I did. In all of anthropology's obsession with the commodity and exchange, from Malinowski on, anthropology has still seemingly failed to grasp onto the modern fundamental nature of

the commodity—the brand. There are notable anthropological publications with titles such as *Material Culture and Mass Consumption, Stuff, and Culture & Consumption*, but surprisingly these titles don't touch on the topic of brand.

It can only be described as shocking that Daniel Miller's 1987 *Material Culture as Mass Consumption*, as well as his 2010 title *Stuff,* contains no mention of the word brand — just as Grant McCraken's 1988 *Culture & Consumption*, contains only one passing mention of the word. It seems nearly impossible for any book that contains a coupling of the words "material," "culture," and "consumption" to *avoid* talking about brand, yet there it is. McCracken's back page reads, "This book is about the origins and imperatives of consumer society. It shows how consumer goods and consumer behavior are shaped by culture and probes the cultural systems of advertising, fashion, collection, lifestyle, and self-definition." Clearly (and accurately) this book frames itself as an investigation of consumer society, even invoking the "system of advertising," yet there is no substantive presence of brand despite the fact that consumerism and brand operate almost as synonyms. It is even more surprising that it is even possible to talk about the "systems of advertising," while only mentioning the word brand once. Both Miller and McCracken approach their subject matter from a materialist perspective and their books are admittedly interesting and informative towards this project; however, it is abundantly clear that they are dead-set on remaining within the realm of traditional anthropological materialism. This is made clear by their avoidance of using the language, "commodity," and, instead, using the more sanitized vocabulary, of "thing" or "object," despite the fact that the things they are talking about are overtly for "consumption"—as each title denotes. Our project is not alone in arguing that the "thing-ness" of an object and its cultural meaning and identity is inseparable from the brand. Ultimately, it's difficult to grasp how one could talk about modern consumerism without discussing the role of brand. However, our project is not to critique for the sake of critique, but in this instance to shed light on an important fact: the two most published and well-known anthropologists who write about material, culture, and consumption do so without ever discussing brand.

Turning now to anthropological articles concerning brand theory—of which there are a

respectable amount — we begin with the only review article available on the subject of brand. Paul

Manning's 2010 review article *The Semiotics of Brand,* brings us back to one of our major themes—

instability. He begins,

> Any discussion of the semiotics of brand confronts the basic problem that there is virtually no
> agreement on what brand is or means. Brand stands at the intersection of the interested discourses
> of brand owners, producers, consumers, as well as a diverse group of professions, each of whom
> have a stake both in the definition of brand as well as in promoting the concept as a whole. In
> addition, brand is often deployed as an unexamined transparent proxy for the real object of
> analytical interest that lies elsewhere (Manning, 34).

We see that brand not only lacks any agreement on definition or mechanism, but also that it rests in a

highly contested space where definition and the promotion thereof seems to treat brand, ironically, as a

kind of intellectual commodity. Lastly, because brand has become so synonymous with global capitalism

that it is often deployed to serve as a symbolic or rhetorical device, a departure from the conventional

domain of economic objects. All this instability and tension, we must remember, is contained within the

specific semiotic treatment of brand. Manning identifies three recent ethnographic "tendencies" in

approaching the brand, "…which can be roughly characterized as consumption-centered, production-

centered, and product-centered" (34). Of these three, the consumption-centered approach is most

dominant, which followed "…the mid-1900s turn to privileging the consumer agency and resistance (34).

However, Manning only briefly describes the consumption-centered approach, quoted above as the most

dominant approach, but instead devotes a whole paragraph to the production-centered methodology,

which, "…while not ignoring the consumer, show the production of brand and definitions of brand to be a

privileged site for the production of professional self-definition within a "system of professions."  In

short, this methodology focuses on the brand through analyzing how brand is "produced" through its

internal production within the corporate context; here, Manning cites Mazzeralla as one practitioner of

this methodology (34).

Moving on, Manning details what he call the "dematerialization" of the brand, writing, "Because

of the metaphysical extensiveness of brand discourse and its tendency toward dematerialization, it

becomes difficult to decide where brand lives as a semiotic phenomena…" (36). Manning astutely argues

that this is in large part due to the fact that brand is "negatively defined," writing "…..the definition of

brand develops over time *via negative*, defining itself not so much by saying what brand is as what it is not: the product" (36). Manning writes that the opposition of brand/product mirrors folk-ontological oppositions such as immaterial/material, form/function, decorative/functional (36). As the brand moves away from being a "symbolic extension" of the product, "the intangible sum of a product's attributes, its name, packaging, and price, its history, reputation…," to a "dull, passive, inert utility…"—which is described as a "leaving behind"— the now denatured product takes on, what Manning calls, new "spiritual dimensions" (Manning, 36). While this portraiture is vivid, it suffers from its own self-imposed limitations. Firstly, the brand is not always conceived as an extension of the product; instead, products are often constructed *for* brands, and secondly, brand/product binary conceived of as a negative is problematized here when we recognize that what has happened is a collapse of the binary; the brand has *become* the product. The brand is negatively defined because of its immateriality, yet at the same time the product can only be defined via brand, since without brand it lacks any articulated meaning as a commodity. Manning writes, "The realization of the brand depends on the materiality of the product (producing Latourian hybrids), but the brand and the product must be kept separate (purification)." Here, Manning seems to be presenting a paradox: Latour's notion of the "hybrid," as a connection of the social and natural, is a direct product of his aversion to duality (40). However, Manning appears to be arguing that the realization of brand depends on the duality, insofar as the materiality of the product and the brand of the product must be kept separate — a direct clash with Latour. Even if Manning is employing a complex semiotic analysis that goes over my head, on a fundamental level, by invoking Latour, Manning appears to endanger his insistence on the separation of brand and product.

Manning's semiotic analysis is lengthy and complex, and ultimately he is analyzing the brand from a very different vantage point than our project necessitates. At the close of his article, he is not only analyzing the brand as a semiotic phenomena but also complicating this by extending the traditional notion of the consumer of the brand to a wider range of consumers — not just those who are buying the brand and its product, but also the corporate client who is "buying into" brand (46). While much of Manning's piece falls outside the purview of our project, he does exemplify a number of pervasive beliefs

about the relationship between brand and product. Firstly, by problematizing the dematerialization of brand, he reveals an aversion to hybrid brand/product, and later overtly positions the "realization" of the brand as dependent on this separation. Despite the fact that this is positioned as a review piece, although Manning seems to speak for himself quite clearly, it may seem trite to criticize it for lacking any situated engagement with the consumer. However, I am willing to bring this criticism specifically because he cites the "consumer-centric" approach as the most dominant semiotic approach, while any discussion of the consumer is largely ignored within this piece. Ultimately, attempts at analyzing brand without grounding it in a situated moment, where brand interfaces with a consumer, can only take you so far. When writing about brand, it is easy to get lost in theoretical technicalities and other abstractions; thankfully, the jarring subjectivity of reality serves as the only antidote—a point which Manning seems to be approaching at the close of his piece. On a most basic level, were Manning to enter a supermarket and ask a customer, "that soda you are buying, what is it? Brand or product?" he might more readily see that the materiality of the product and its brand are not so easily separated, and, furthermore, that these sorts of theoretical questions struggle, when abstracted beyond the immediate context of the brand and consumer relationship. That being said, Manning does help to illustrate that the technical relationship between product and brand cannot be ignored as a foundational starting place; he deserves significant credit in that his piece goes into the technical dimensions of brand/product that are otherwise ignored.

One of the more illuminating anthropological articles on brand is Nakassis's 2013 *Brands and Their Surfeits*, which analytically approaches the brand through the "counterfeit" and other unauthorized brand forms. A central recurring theme in Nakassis's piece is the instability of brands, as he writes in his abstract, "…the novel and often unpredictable social meaning that emerges through moments of brand consumption, on the other hand, I argue that at the heart of the brand is an instability, a tendency towards an excess of meaning and material" (1). For Nakassis, these instances of instability where the brand is reconfigured and re-negotiated in moments of tension, constituted by the "fake" inauthentic brand — as he writes, "moments when the brand displaces itself" — these are the moments where brand comes into focus as a relational and socially-negotiated thing (2). While Nakassi focuses primarily on brand as it is

troubled by its material surfeit—the counterfeit—, in a broader sense he is one of the few anthropologists who clearly addresses the instability and dynamism of the consumer/brand relationship, writing, "On the other hand, the brand is troubled by the surfeit of social meaning that is constantly produced by idiosyncratic and contextualized experiences of consumer engagement with brand forms (authorized or otherwise)" (3). Nakassi explicitly writes, "The brand is never able to legislate its own intelligibility completely," going on to enumerate, "there are simply no guarantees that the brand will be seen by various consumer publics as it projects itself, or even as a brand or "counterfeit at all" (8). Going even deeper, Nakassi argues that brand viability depends on consumers generating meaning through brand engagement that goes beyond existing "brand image or identity;" this material surfeit of image "…consumers' local meanings, idiosyncratic associations, and emotional investments" are the source of the brand's "vitality" (9). As he articulates, "The brand's fragility and openness to novel (re)signification creates surplus value because it makes the brand a possible site, and medium, for socially and affective attachment" (ibid. 9). Here, Nakassi is making an essential point about the instability inherent in the socially-constructed brand. While Nakassi's article trends towards complicating the inherently socially-constructed and unstable nature of the brand with language such as "surplus value," he nevertheless provides one of the clearest anthropological accounts of brand as a fragile and unstable thing, precisely because brand exists relationally between consumers and "brand producers." As he makes explicit, "This is not simply a theoretical point. It is an empirical observation, one that escapes marketing theory and other brand discourses that assume the pre-given intelligibility, coherence, and stability of the brand," going on to state that it is only in moments where the brand is displaced and treated as an unstable element that we can begin to engage with brand (ibid. 10).

While Nakassi makes the point of the instability of brand, locating it in large part in the relational social articulation and re-articulation inherent in the brand consumer relationship, he is less clear on what kind of "agency" this process confers on the consumer. Although Nakassi is engaging the consumer in important ways, he is still doing it from a distance. His perspectival vantage point seems to revolve around the corporate element of brand. He seems even to echo Mazzeralla in his conclusion, when he

writes that "Brand logic requires the brand to constantly slip outside of itself, to traffic in risk and threat (and thus speculative possibility), a promiscuity that must be closely monitored by legal and marketing practice." Thus, while he acknowledges the nature of brand as a socially-constructed and mediated thing via the consumer, and privileges this as a site for the analysis of the brand, he nonetheless seems to locate the essence of brand as belonging in the domain of the corporate (ibid.13). In short, he recognizes that brand is reshaped and reimagined by consumers, but he isn't interested in what this means for the consumer, but rather what this means for the brand, which ultimately reveals itself to be essentially conflated with the corporate. Despite Nakassi being one of the more enlightening and valuable authors in our project, he is nevertheless approaching brand from a distinctly—to return to Manning— "production centered" logic. Nakassi acknowledges the same relational constructed nature of consumer/brand, but, while his treatment of the brand is developed at length, his attention to the role played by the consumer in the consumer/brand binary is comparatively nascent, despite the fact that he explicitly admits that it is the consumer who is singularly responsible for "brand viability." Our critique of Nakassi is not to problematize his "production-centered" approach, nor his privileging the corporate brand side over the "consumer side," but simply to criticize his lack of reflexivity, so as to highlight another common theme. No anthropologists writing on brand seem to feel the need to justify or explain the logic behind their asymmetrical privileging of brand over consumer. In this case, the consumer is positioned as the sole agent responsible for "brand vitality," while they are simultaneously placed as a kind of oppositional counter-point against which the corporate element can be analyzed. It seems that such blatant asymmetries should require some kind of explanation, especially from a piece such as Nakassi's which predicates itself on the instability of the consumer/brand relationship. Ultimately, it is all too common to see the role of the consumer glossed over—without any explanation—as an essential, yet faceless, actor in corporate construction of brand; such a tendency could seemingly only develop through the discursive naturalization of the consumer as an abstract agentic object, something to be related *to*, not *with*.

In a second 2012 article titled *Brand, Citationality, and Performativity*, Nakassi discusses the semiotic structure of brand as an alignment between brand "tokens," "types," and "ontologies;" however,

where his article differs—even if just slightly—from other semiotic treatments of brand, is that in his conclusion when he calls for us to turn our attention to moments where the brand is "denatured"—again we must note the prevalent theme of instability—he writes, "Such an approach requests us to be committed, on one hand to the empirical (and I would suggest ethnographic) of the actual social lives of brands in their historical and cultural contexts…" (636). In short, even while approaching brand from an exclusively semiotic perspective, he suggests that an "empirical" situated study of the "actual social lives" of brands is also necessary. This phenomena of "stopping short" of engaging the actual situated reality of brand and consumer while simultaneously acknowledging its importance, is a pervasive trend that graces the conclusions of many other anthropological and sociological texts I've read. The importance of this intimate situated knowledge of brand is taciturnly acknowledged, but never engaged. In my eyes, this points to the conscious or unconscious knowledge that such an admission must necessarily accompany any anthropologist working within the prevailing notion of brand, as relationally-defined and produced from the consumer/brand relationship. Even if writers want to avoid directly engaging the binary to focus on some other angle—such as semiotics—the admission itself helps fortify the piece and absolve the writer of any analytical oversight on the subject of brand.

Turning now to a hybrid economic and culture-oriented anthropological approach to brand in David Foster's 2007 article *The Work of the New Economy: Consumers, Brands, and Value Creation:* Foster promisingly states in his abstract, "My goal in this article is to apprehend claims about person-product relationships now circulating in the world of business. I take up approaches that presuppose the embeddedness of economic action in shifting networks or assemblages of people and things, and that call attention to the agency distributed within such networks." However, he falls short precisely because he ultimately appears unable to access this "person-product" relationship in anything other than its most abstract form as an "assemblage" (Foster, 727-8). Foster's project attempts to center his proposition of consumer agency and "value creation" around a 1997 case study of a Coca-Cola sponsored photography competition—an overt attempt at marketing— by drawing upon secondary sources or "accounts" of two other anthropologists (ibid 728). Foster continues to engage his question via this case study through an

analysis of these two anthropologists, yet comes short of substantive analysis as his conclusion indicates, "…consumer agency is a source of disruption, of unruly overflowings that escape capture and even destroy value—notably, the value of brands…This disruption stems from consumer agency's capacity to assemble publics around matters of concern."   Returning to his case study, "When these matters of concern originate in the business operations of corporations…such as Coca-Cola soft drinks, the proliferation of concerned individuals and groups assembled as a public can seem almost endless" (ibid. 727). Certainly, Foster seems to have presented an answer to his general question of the agency of publics or assemblages; however, we see that the "person" within the analysis of the "person-product" relationship is only ever addressed as an "assemblage," and not as an actual "person" in the sense of the singular individual. Here, Foster stops short of addressing the nature of agency in the "person-product" relationship because he only addresses the "person" in the context of a "public" or an "assemblage" and not in their agency as *actual* individuals. This piece exemplifies the seeming inability of anthropological writings on brand to resist any approach to the consumer that does not involve casting them into sweeping groups or "assemblages," while, simultaneously, allowing the juxtaposing brand to retain its individuality and agency as an analytical object.

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In retrospect, our review has sought to pick out texts that are both representative of some element of the discourse, while also choosing to engage the most salient and promising anthropological work relating to brand for our project—writing that comes closest to the particularity of the consumer/brand relationship, for the sake of presenting the most productive engagement possible. Our review has attempted to populate the discursive landscape our project inhabits. Beyond the basic necessity of situating oneself in a discourse, our critical engagement with the anthropological literature of brand has revealed the crucial points of productive tension. Before turning towards a more critical lens, through our analytical review we found one clear all-important commonality between our treatment of brand and the discourse—the theme of instability and relationality. Our philosophical treatment of brand was a journey that began with the seeming "unspeakable" relationship between the product and the individual in ancient

Greek thought, into Marx, tracing the development of this tension and instability, and finally ending by establishing an inherent instability in the relationship between individual and commodity. In short, as I wrote in Section I, "Philosophy has not only shown us that the true nature of the commodity is found in its social meaning—its brand—, but also the essential instability of this social meaning, this territory within which modern brand marketing attempts to assert itself." Just as we predicted, the earliest form of brand creation can explicitly be seen addressing this instability inherent in the consumer/commodity relationship, in their attempt to create branded "social meanings" to affix to commodities in order to compete in the marketplace. Within Section I, we also presented that this instability and tension was a result of the relational nature of the consumer and the branded commodity. Our literature review reveals a discourse of brand that directly reflects the relational instability of brand that we identified in Section I. Echoing the concluding chapter in Section I, "Synthesis: Philosophy to Brand," the anthropological discourse presents a theoretical framework of brand as a relationship between consumer and brand, with some writers going further to engage the dynamism inherent in this relationality: its tensions, re-articulations, and transgressions. Thus, on this most fundamental level, the discourse of the anthropology of the brand seems to further and carry forward the basic understanding of brand that we were only able to tentatively suggest in our first section.

While it is a relief to find that the anthropology of brand seems to—on some level—reflect the understanding of brand that we approached through our philosophical inquiry, it also appears as though the discursive engagement with brand stops short at this basic level. Again, to return to one of the earliest themes of the project — the "unspeakable" nature of the individual/product relationship — we see what might appear as a potential second iteration of this same un-approachability, in which the anthropological discourse on brand seems to lag both in quality and quantity. In the last 20 years, brand has explosively extended from the corporate world to be a clarion call to legions of "wired in" media consumers who are actively taking on the role of personal brand managers in creating, crafting and managing their own brand identities moment by moment. In fact, it is difficult to identify another phenomenon such as brand, in terms of launching such an outpouring of cultural focus, creativity, and meaning-making as the

brand. Lifestyle brands, and many others, create whole lexicons of meaning, value and imagery that consumers readily consume and engage with. Billions and billions of dollars are being spent, not to mention, as well, that some of our best and brightest creative minds are all busy working in service to the production, management and ever-evolving mythos of brand worlds—while anthropology appears only on the sidelines.

At its core, the construction of brand as a relational binary of consumer/brand, lends itself well to an avoidance or singular focus on just one aspect of the binary. This is seen poignantly in Mazzeralla's ethnography: by having already situated the consumer/brand relationship, this binary sets a precedent that allows Mazzeralla to almost exclusively discuss the corporate brand side of the binary, while the consumer side can be taken for granted as an established thing. Here the established binary allows Mazzeralla to engage, analyze, and speak at great length to the brand side, all while the consumer remains distinctly secondary. Here, it would be too much to say that the consumer/brand relationship remains "unspeakable;" but, insofar as one would desire a symmetrical binary of consumer/brand, we see that Mazzeralla has explicitly chosen to rely on this established theoretical binary as a kind of analytical precedent or starting place that allows him to configure and understand the consumer without having to do any real "new work" on the theoretical brand binary.

Perhaps the strongest indication of this "unspeakable" nature of the consumer/brand relationship, is the simple fact that Mazzeralla's *Shoveling Smoke* is the only fully-fledged ethnographic attempt to approach brand, as every other anthropological approach is a theoretical one. While the anthropological discourse relating to brand is comparatively small, I can find no other strand in anthropology that is as bafflingly dominated by the theoretical treatment of a very approachable phenomena such as ours. There is no doubt that the anthropology relating to brand falls within the bounds of cultural anthropology, dipping into economic as well as linguistic/semiotic anthropology, yet the field seems to avoid fieldwork and ethnography, with no obvious explanation. If anything, the discursively established understanding of brand as a relationship between consumer and brand, seems to *explicitly* call for fieldwork. Here, brand is clearly identified as being constructed out of a system of reciprocity, between two distinct agentic actors

where the hierarchy and power are explicitly negotiated and performed—in short, the anthropology of the brand is overflowing with the classic themes anthropology has historically engaged through ethnography. To pull just one element, reciprocity: there is no doubt that every anthropologist who has written on brand is quite familiar with the canonical debate—which is firmly situated in fieldwork— between Malinowski and Mauss over the "norm of reciprocity," where even Lévi-Strauss ultimately weighs in with the claim that all human relationships are based on the norm of reciprocity. We must then ask ourselves why all the anthropologists, who have written on brand as a system of reciprocity, have avoided fieldwork? And even beyond that, why have they largely avoided even calling for a more grounded or situated approach?

Returning to a more direct critical place, what our review poignantly revealed is that the literature of brand lacks any direct grounded engagement with the consumer/brand relationship. Even in the singular ethnography discussed, the actual "voice" of the consumer remains unheard and underrepresented, while we get plenty of access to the voices of marketers and "brand-producers." Even after putting aside our fundamental disagreements with writers who privilege the agency of the corporate over the consumer, we still encounter a fundamental problem. Even as almost every anthropological engagement with brand privileged the site of the consumer/brand relationship as the locus of knowledge for analyzing the brand, there are seemingly no attempts made at *actually* accessing this site in any direct way.  Furthermore, throughout the discourse, the engagement with the consumer side of this relational binary of brand is virtually nonexistent, while the agency and voice of the brand, in stark contrast, is omnipresent—likely due to its comparative accessibility. The discourse seemingly acknowledges the primacy of the consumer/brand relationship as *the* singular and richest source of knowledge, even while anthropologist practitioners seem either uninterested, unwilling or unable to access this site of "knowledge production" in any *direct* way.

As a result, the discourse as a whole appears to hover above an analysis of brand, recapitulating and reformulating similar ideas without advancing into any distinctly or noticeably "new" analytical territory. I would argue that this stagnation is a direct result of the fact that most anthropologists have complacently worked with an understanding of brand as consumer/brand relationship, as if it were a kind

of agreed-upon and defined analytical framework, without going beyond the superficial to engage with the "actual" situated nature of the consumer/brand relationship. Taken as a whole, anthropology has seemingly taken only the smallest step towards engaging the cultural phenomenon of brand, and stopped dead. The *particularity* of an engagement with brand—which, ironically, writers often insist upon—is thrown away in favor of the superficial, and now discursively stale, anthropological understanding of brand. Our project is fundamentally incompatible with this impoverished analytical framing of brand, as the consumer/brand relationship lacks any actual depth or substance. Rather, to know brand, you must observe its *actual* creation and ongoing consumer-driven evolution. Only through a contextualized and situated analysis can we even begin to approach the interconnected questions of how brand is created and engaged. What we require is a finely-tuned analytical instrument that is designed specifically for a direct engagement with the individual and brand—with that, we return to the focus group.

**Chapter 4- Returning to *Our* Focus Group as a Site**

Marketers, like the anthropologists we have read, know that brand exists as a brand/consumer relationship; thus, the focus group is the preeminent tool for the marketer, because it fills the gaps of any quantitative knowledge with deeper qualitative knowledge of the consumer. The focus group is synonymous with a richer and deeper approach to brand, because it is seen as the most intimate site of interface between the consumer and the brand. However, while the focus group can be generalized in the same way brand can be generalized, our project has a unique methodological approach to the focus group. Our methodology is one that seeks to elicit and engage intimate consumer/brand relationship — a methodology that, when examined, is equally illustrative of how brand operates. Turning then to detail how *our* focus group approaches the substance of brand, we begin by painting a rough picture. Each focus group begins in essentially the same way: participants quietly shuffle in, find their seats, sometimes grab a soda or take a glass of water, and turn their heads to the moderator at the head of the table. Each focus group has a similarly rehearsed beginning that is carefully and intentionally crafted. Most participants are here after work, although in my experience they don't appear to show it. I would imagine that they would rather be at home; thus, following this, it makes sense that the whole success of any particular focus group

is dependent upon making, or allowing, participants to be engaged and interested. Speaking to the nuances of hierarchy and authority that Kratz touches on, the moderator is purposefully dressed in casual and neutral attire that is intended to put everyone at ease; as not every participant has the same expectation for a focus group, some come in dressed informally, while others seem to have dressed up for the occasion. This easily-overlooked, purposeful decision of neutral casual attire is the first instance where the implicit authority of the moderator is intentionally toned down. The group begins in an informal and friendly way; individuals are asked to raise their hands "if they've done this before," and jokes are made, "it can't be too bad if these people came back for a second time." From here, participants are assured that the moderator isn't looking for, or expecting, any kind of specific answers, but that they just want to hear honest opinions. Additionally, it is emphasized that the moderator doesn't represent any brand or product that might be discussed, so participants shouldn't worry about saying what they really think. The participants, instead, are purposefully invoked as experts, stressing that, "we are here today to hear what *you* have to say." It is casually joked that everyone sitting at the table are essentially strangers, and that, after these two hours are up, everyone will go their own way. Lastly, participants are actively encouraged to speak their mind, to disagree with one another, and, most importantly, to have fun.

The two major points, or "notes," that the focus group is attempting to establish from the get-go are: firstly, the comfort of the participant, and the positioning of them as empowered voices that we carefully *selected* and are actually *paying* to hear. Everything done in the beginning of the focus group is designed around diffusing and democratizing authority, and the moderator is projecting an "amped-up," fun and casual character in order to position the group as simply a casual discussion among peers. Individuals are asked to introduce themselves not in the "boring way," but are, instead, encouraged to share something about their hobbies and what they're really interested in. In short, rather than get a sense of who works where and how much they make and all the other sorts of "differentiation" that accompany the standard introduction (age, job, family life, etc.), participants are encouraged to see each other as peers, while also diffusing any potential differences or tensions. As the focus group goes on, you can visibly see participants relax and open up. This is really the only generalizable portrait of the focus group:

that, from the beginning, individuals are invited to let their guard down and engage in as authentic a discussion as any group of like individuals can possibly have. And, with very few exceptions, from the carefully-crafted seminal beginning of the focus group, until the end, the system seems to work flawlessly. Of course, some groups work better than others, but this seems to come down to how well the individual members of the group seem to mesh with each other, rather than the actual topic of the focus group or anything the moderator does or asks.

Addressing this specific and intentional construction of a focus group, we can begin to analyze and engage it as a unique site of knowledge production. First and foremost, we can see that the focus group as a "site" is purposefully producing a "space" that exists outside of the expected, or typical, hierarchies one might associate with the standard idea of what a focus group is: a space where honest and authentic discussion is encouraged, and where the individual's experiences and opinions are heard and valued, not just among their fellows but also by the "nameless corporation" that wants to hear *your* voice. The knowledge that this is still a focus group, that there is some purpose here, that the participant's voice is being seen, heard, and, above all, valued by the austere "Corporate," is equally essential. The realization that something you say may very well actively shape the next flavor of Coke, or the next packaging innovation for Cheez-Its, or the next series on HBO, is an undeniably powerful realization. But often, since focus groups are, for the most part, non-specific or vague before they narrow in, just having your experiences and opinions *heard* is itself a powerful thing—especially among groups of individuals who are not accustomed to this sensation. Oftentimes, people will leave smiling, asking, "Who this was for?" or, "What was this about?" Sometimes they will even stay after the group and thank the moderator for such a unique and unexpected intimate experience. In many ways, the focus group cuts the outside world off; it invites and empowers a striking kind of intimate honesty. It is difficult to describe how visibly you can see the mood or "tenor" of the room change, from a group of people who likely expected to be asked a series of dry questions by some man in a suit, to a group who has participated in a genuine conversation and purposefully creative exploration, where each has experienced the sensation of empowerment and the feeling that they have somehow been "heard" by someone – as well as offered up

worthy insights. This, of course, occurs in degrees; not every group or individual appears to experience this transformation, although I would say it seems to occur more often than not in my experience as an onlooker. Throughout my many observations, at the very least, a "good" group transforms a bored and confused group of people who had no expectation whatsoever of "this" focus group experience, let alone any expectation of "catharsis," into a group who seemingly leaves with a sense of having experienced something entirely unexpected and unique.

This is not just the by-product of the focus group, but an intentional result of individuals having had an experience of being "heard" by their peers, as well as by something as abstract and austere as a corporation. The goal of each focus group is not only to hear what each individual experiences in their daily life, but also to get as close to evoking an individual's authentic experience and engagement with brand as possible. Because brand never exists in a cultural vacuum, each focus group necessarily has to ground itself in the individual and collective experiences of its participants.  Before continuing on to more narrow and nuanced questions, there must necessarily be a context. Participants are not asked to abstract themselves from the realities of their everyday life so as to get at some "pure" notion of how they relate to a brand, but rather the opposite. They are asked to ground their experiences and engagement with brand in their daily experiences, which is why the focus group begins with, and is predicated on, these larger questions of social and cultural experience. Brand knowledge must be situated in a deeper contextualized knowledge of its consumer. This is not a fetishization of everyday life, but rather the simple admission that knowledge of any kind cannot be separated from its context, which is especially true of any knowledge regarding the engagement with brand, as it is almost always deeply rooted in layers of meaning. Thus, particular to brand work, the focus group is producing or articulating existing latent knowledge, but it could be more accurately depicted as a process of unpacking the knowledge and insight a consumer has surrounding a brand – much of which is unconsciously held. For brand, the focus group as a site of knowledge is neither the abstraction of the brand from everyday life, nor an obsession with the situated details of everyday engagement with brand; rather, it is somewhere in the middle.

Taking a step back, having established a fully-fledged description of our focus group as the

"material" that serves as the foundation for our ethnographic project, we have seemingly returned to center on the situated moment where an individual consumer engages with brand in a relational way. In other words, the methodology of our focus group mirrors the same notion that brand must be engaged and understood as a constructed relational thing that rests as the premise for our project. The methodology of our focus group allows us to engage the nature of brand in its purest and most dynamic form, situated in different brands with different contexts, situated in socio-cultural relationships, as well as within individual relationships. Each project's focus groups reveal its own unique and layered relationship, imagery, values and associations with a brand, while at the same time contributing to the greater body of understanding brand. Only through patching together many situated projects—which are, in turn, the sum of the knowledge produced within the focus groups—and their commonalities and divergences, can we hope to approach a greater, more general, analysis of how brand operates as a relational vehicle of meaning.

**SECTION III- What *is* Brand?**

**Chapter 1- A Return: What is *our* Brand?**

Stepping back, having surveyed the discourse around brand and engaged it with our project's focus group methodology, we are now at the point where we can begin to engage with brand on our own terms. We have seen how the world of business and marketing engages brand. We have seen how the anthropological discourse engages brand, locating and defining it as the product of a consumer/brand relationship. However, as we identified, both these approaches suffer from a fundamental superficiality. In the case of anthropology, which frames brand as a relational dichotomy of consumer/brand—a kind of analytical truism itself—, we see how neglected the *actual* situated nature of the consumer/brand relationship is. As a result, it appears that we have to go back to a kind of analytical drawing board if our project is to holistically engage brand. This is why we return to the same, all-encompassing, question that occupied the conclusion of our first section. However, we are at the point where we are creating our own new framework for understanding and engaging brand; thus, we can modify the question to—what is *our* brand?

Fortunately, we have already done some of this work; we have determined that the commodity and the brand are distinct elements. Without the social meaning or intelligibility that brand creates, the commodity is a lifeless thing. And, in turn, without the commodity the brand has no intelligible substance. Thus, brand must be constructed as a union of these two distinct and identifiable units. If we want to understand an individual product, we must also understand its brand. On a basic level, this appears as brand product synergy, where the product delivers on the promise of its brand and, simultaneously, the brand's halo extends and delivers the product it has promised. The conflation of product and brand, which Manning aptly described as a "dematerialization" of brand, is an easy, yet dangerous, mistake—one we see many anthropologists writing on brand fall victim to. Even in a semiotic analysis such as Manning's, who acknowledges that brand is becoming increasingly immaterial, the greater analytical question of "why" that follows is answered only through attributing it to the undeniably abstract trend of "dematerialization of meaning" that Manning cites (Manning, 34). While Manning

illustrates an important trend, he does not readily provide us with any answer. Furthermore, while Manning directly addresses the nature of brand as a relationship between product and brand, when he ultimately discusses the "dematerialization" of brand, he is speaking about brand in the most general sense — brand as a phenomenon. Our project needs to narrow in on the *particularity* of how and why the brand becomes dematerialized from its product.

The technical relationship between product and brand cannot be ignored as a foundational starting place; generally speaking, brands are built around products. Furthermore, in the most general sense, the materiality of the product itself always exists before the brand. The nature of the product structures the brand in important ways, just as the brand helps structure the product, both for its producer and consumer. As thinkers such as Appadurai and DeCerteau illustrate, objects cannot be separated from a socio-cultural context; value and meaning always exist in relation to the world of objects that is constructed and re-constructed. Thus, in the most general sense, the product is already socially-situated. Putting the modern notion of the brand aside, one could even think of this as a "meta-brand," insofar as brand already exists within any cultural object as its meaning.  For example, the cultural and social meaning or function of wine is distinctly different than that of hard liquor; we are poignantly aware of the normative structures inherent in our understanding of the roles, rites, and rules of consumption, etc. Thus, any product already exists in a socially-constructed and meaningful way; it is already "meta-branded" by our culture. To illustrate, the idea of attempting to sell your consumer an idea of an "extreme party wine" seems a bit ludicrous, as it goes against the normative consumption of wine as something associated with sophistication, relaxation, and civility. This, of course, is culturally and normatively situated; however, it is far easier to work within the structures that culture imposes on products than to attempt to subvert them. We cannot ignore the ways that the cultural and normative landscape structures the product, if we want to understand the technical relationship between product and brand. In short, the product dictates what territory the brand might be able to play in. Although it may be easier and expedient to speak of brand as an implicit hybrid combination of brand and product, this move cannot be undertaken without first fully acknowledging the essential technical nature of the product and its relationship to brand.

To further this, in the marketing context it is not uncommon to hear that a certain product is too "brand heavy," or that a certain brand is too "product heavy." This is an asymmetry that is not uncommon — consumers buying a product without feeling any attachment to the brand, or a consumer buying a product simply because of its brand. Of course, it is more complex than this as there are many more factors or motivations in play, but, on a basic level, there should be an appropriate symmetry between brand and product in the eyes of the consumer. This is the ideal, the synthesis of brand and product where a consumer is buying a product not only on the merits of the product's physical attributes, but also because the brand has successfully imbued the product with meaningful imagery and attributes—this is not *just* a can of 'cola,' this is a Coke.

Going forward, we admit to the "dematerialization" of brand, but insist on an engagement of brand that consciously—if implicitly— includes the product/brand relationship. In this way, the brand is undoubtedly fully dematerialized from its product, but our treatment of brand has attempted to anticipate and incorporate the inherent materiality of brand in our ongoing project. In our project, dematerialization is a consciously ever-present element of the brand. Thus, when we refer to brand, we are also implicitly invoking its materiality. Lastly, we would argue that the general dematerialization of the brand in mass culture was always an inevitability — a dematerialization that takes on a new character in the modern digital era, a subject that will be returned to.

Having now established the essential nature of the relationship between brand and product as a part of our working analytical framework, we can move forward in our analysis of brand and how it operates. To establish a working definition of brand, we begin by considering how brand works, what it does, and why. On a most basic level, as the marketing textbooks would corroborate, brand helps differentiate one product from another in the eyes of the consumer. In this purely utilitarian configuration, brand exists to present a choice to the consumer in a crowded context. However, this seemingly obvious and basic definition lays the groundwork for the construction of brand as a relationship between the consumer and the brand, as the notion of choice is an affirmation of the consumer's agency. The obvious move here is to recognize that this choice is not a choice, but rather a "choose me." In that particular

moment where any consumer stands in a grocery store aisle staring at a multi-colored sea of cereal boxes, each product is crying out "choose me." And which cereal will our consumer choose? They will choose the product who they *heard*. And, in turn, they will hear and pay attention to the "voice" of the brand that seems to best understand them, reflect their identity, affirm and celebrate their values, and share their sense of style. This is the language of the brand — the brand voice.

Of course, we must admit that branding is not the only element of marketing, just as it is not the only element of choice. There is pricing, display, convenience, and many other elements that go into marketing a particular choice. That being said, brand remains at the core. When marketing a choice, brand and all its attributes—product, advertising, package design, etc.— must align; but we must also consider the practical reality. If I go to the grocery store on a budget, I am looking for product choices that are affordable; however, this, of course, does not mean that I am simply going to buy the cheapest version of every product on my grocery list. Rather, before I even enter the store, I have strong ideas about which brands are expensive and which brands are cheap. I might buy a more generic-looking item because I believe that the generic brand is always the most affordable, without considering other options and realizing that some other brand is actually cheaper — as I've heard countless times in focus groups: some version of, "Oh I don't even look at those, they look too expensive." Brand recognizes that it must play its role, it must embody a certain choice. Here, since our example revolves around packaged goods, cheaper brands are almost always more visually muted; they lack the more colorful and flashy "branded" look of more expensive choices—however, this appearance/price phenomena is present in almost every commodity. In short, the visual appearance corresponds to the notion that they are an affordable choice, and are strategically trying to appear sensible, clear and value-conscious. Here, we see one of the most basic precepts of brand: it is aimed at fully embodying and voicing a choice, or a set of choices, ranging from the intimate to the mundane.

While it certainly isn't the singular function of brand, at its productive core, brand seeks to project a kind of embodied identity, a voice; we see that the project of brand creation is the construction of an embodied entity that speaks to the consumer—a distinct echo of Marx's fetishism. The key here, then, is

to speak in a "voice" that is most easily heard and engaged. In a project of co-creation with the consumer, the brand takes on human qualities and attributes as it is anthropomorphized. The brand takes on an embodied identity that unmistakably mirrors relatable human characteristics.  The brand is speaking to us in our language; it is both reflecting, anticipating, and leading us. Brands are constructed around identifying and addressing consumer needs, wants, and desires. Most often, the focus is centered around the want and desire part, as these tap into a powerful emotional space which is usually a winning move. As an aim, brands are always aspirational; they almost always promise something that you desire. Here the "voice" of brand attempts to tap into your emotional and aspirational self—as Mazzerella engages in his treatment of advertising. Brands always contain a coded promise, a set of images and emotions designed to speak to something you desire — not the *you* you are now, but the *you* you want to be. This is not to say that brands always succeed in this, but this aspirational quality is at the root of every brand. A brand is like any identity; it desires to be the kind of person it wants to *be*, the kind of person it wants to project.  In Baudrillard's early 1968 work *The System of Objects*, he engages and modernizes Marx's analysis of the commodity in a particularly enlightening way, suggesting that the qua object of consumption is a thing not in relation to other individuals or objects, but that, "*It is consumed instead as a signifier of that relation*," continuing,

> This defines consumption as a systematic and *total idealist* practice, which far exceeds our
> relations to objects and relations among individuals, one that extends to all manifestations
> (*registres)* of history, communication, and culture. Thus, the need for culture is alive: but in the
> collector's book or in the dining room lithograph; only the *idea* is *consumed* (27).

In Baudrillard's interpretation, consumption no longer has to do with the satisfaction of needs or even with the "reality principle." For him, consumption and the object rest completely in the real of the idealistic; as he states, "only the idea is consumed" (Baudrillard 27). What Baudrillard is suggesting is that consumption no longer has anything to do with the object itself, but with what the *idea* of the consumed object *promises*. Baudrillard is not only insightful, but also far ahead of his time in suggesting that the act of consumption has become a personal idealistic practice, where it is not the just the product

itself that is consumed, but, rather, it is the *idea* and the personal expectations, meanings, and values associated with the objects that are consumed. Articulating something that would take decades to make its way into the marketing discourse, Baudrillard identifies the inherently idealistic motivation of consumption. Thus, when I am buying a new dining room table, I am really buying the possibility of delicious family dinners, the promise of good conversation with friends, laughter, joy and recognition of my idealized identity.  When I am buying a new, expensive Mercedes I am not just buying a car; I am buying the *idea* of sophistication, success, status. It doesn't seem a leap to suggest that Baudrillard's "*consumed idea*" is synonymous with brand, as brand is the principle purveyor of both of these "ideas" and the commodified objects they are associated with. In fact, the very idea of the brand seems to hinge on this individualized and idealistic model of consumption; the "voice" of brand is seeking to tap into your most intimate aspirations and personal projections. When it succeeds, brand is not only selling you a product, nor are they are selling you the idea of a product, but instead they are selling you a better *you*.

As a vehicle for expression, brands are unparalleled.  They transform a simple object into a meaningful statement — a world of meanings that is wielded by the individual consumer, to provide something capable of extending and leveraging their own equally flexible identity. The brand presents us with a readymade set of meanings that we can co-opt, inhabit, and make *ours*. In constructing a new framework of thought, beginning from the first point, we recognize that, fundamentally, branded material allows for an externalization, an embodiment of identity. In a simple sense, it makes the task of representing and projecting oneself easier. In our world of rampant consumerism and branding, we see modern marketing as a clear answer to the fundamental human need for externalization and embodiment of identity. Thus, on this most superficial level, we see a direct dialectical relationship between the human need for externalization and the branded material world.

It is upon this recognition of the human need for externalization and some kind of self-actualization — fantastical or not — that the brand seeks to engage. Brands, from a marketer's perspective, are useful icons, repositories, or even totemic entities that are capable of storing and emanating a tremendous amount of meaning. In this way, they are invaluable investments; over time they

can come to accrue deep meaning and resonance that represents a clear beacon and promise to the consumer. In our hyper-technologized era of consumerism, we are bombarded with thousands of brands every day—each of which jostles against the others, seeking to catch our attention, to "speak" something meaningful to us. The parade of brands flicker past our glazed eyes, yet there are only a privileged few that manage to clearly cut through the clutter. Thus, the project of branding, from the perspective of a marketer, is to create and cultivate a compellingly meaningful identity, with the hopes of creating a meaningful connection. Often this begins by identifying the needs, wants and desires that are not being addressed or "spoken to" effectively in the marketplace.

For the big players—Fortune 500 companies and the like—the question is often approached more broadly: What brand identity or personality can we *own*? Brands exist in a highly competitive product category environment in which no one wants to share brand territory. After identifying an opening or weakness, (which marketers call "white space") these brands reach for the most aspirational high-ground territory set available in a category, upon which to establish their brand identity. By doing so, they seek to not only establish a positive bounded claim, but also to preemptively establish a defense so that they can deflect or subsume competitors who dare to set up camp on the territory the brand "owns." There are many examples of mis-attribution — where a consumer sees a competitor's advertising and attributes it to the dominant brand. This is, in part, the practice of the brand — to leave little-to-no solid territory for other brands to occupy, and to forcefully dominate their space. In essence, brands seek to construct and project a distinct and unmistakable identity with all its components: emotional, visual, symbolic, archetypal, sonic. For the most dominant brands—the household names— this "claim" becomes immediately evident: Coke owns the color red, Corona owns the beach, Affleck owns the "duck quack," Nike owns the energy, uplift and boldness of the swoosh, etc. However, these more immediate brand claims are anchored with a fully-realized and highly-managed and deliberate identity. Over time, within their categories, brands seek to own key emotional values as well, and become symbols of these values. Apple owns creative elegance. Heineken owns European/Global sophistication. Haagen-Daz owns decadent, adult sensual indulgence, while Ben & Jerry's owns innocent, playful, chaotic, sweet joy. In

each of these categories, the brands have staked their identity, and, for example, even though they both share the category of "ice cream," Haagen-Daz and Ben & Jerry's have each created highly differentiated brands in order to leverage their unique skills, and craft a brand that speaks to their consumer in their unique way. In establishing their own recognizable identity, they tap into deep emotional territory. This itself cuts right to the heart of brand, as a response to a human need for externalization and self-actualization.

**Chapter 2- The Intersection of Brand and Identity**

Having established our project's analytical framework for the brand—what it looks like, how and why it works, what it does— we are now finally at the point where we are able to go into the consumer/brand relationship. We will now seek to narrow our view and analyze the specific and situated consumer/brand relationship. To begin, by centering on brand and identity, it is necessary to reiterate that, while the brand is a carefully crafted and voiced projection that the consumer "hears," each consumer hears this voice in their own way. Elements of the brand proposition are accepted, while some are ignored or rejected—consumers pick and choose. As we have called attention to throughout our project, the brand is a dynamic vehicle. Brand is engaged, interpreted, and personalized by the individual consumer and incorporated into the endless human cycle of self-creation.

To explore the role of brand in self-creation, the projection and externalization of self, we have to break down its elements and mechanisms. Brand is seen as a readymade object or device that consumers often implicitly describe as assisting in "understanding yourself" on the level of individual identity, because brand is often perceived as being more flexible than one's "actual" individual identity. There are, of course, ranges of this sentiment within every brand engagement — from individuals who seem to engage brand as a kind of ready-made device that can assist in the augmentation of the self, to far deeper and more intimate levels of identity-construction. But even when the brand is described as a kind of device of augmentation, consumers still are engaging with the construction of identity via brand even in seemingly superficial every-day instances. Individuals will use brand to reinforce, amplify, extend etc. various aspects of their internal and external identity. To begin, by discussing brand as a kind of device of

augmentation: this is one of the central ways that brand can clearly be seen as being an engrained part of everyday life, as well as the perpetual process of identity-creation and externalization. Each interaction with commodity is an interaction with brand and its meanings—consciously or unconsciously. The brand is always described as "allowing" or "inviting" the consumer do something. To provide an example, as one focus group participant responded when asked what an ice-cream brand "did" for them, "This is more outgoing, social — would make me into a great singer! I would run straight home to my sister, pull out two spoons and a bottle of champagne and have a seat on the couch and chat." Here, this participant exemplifies how brands are imaged as a sort of emotional trigger. Here, brand is seen as being a catalyst to change and augment your personality and identity in the moment, and perhaps more broadly.

This conception of brand carries over across a range of brands from consumer goods to cosmetics, and, while it appears in different forms, it ultimately returns to the idea that brand "invites" or "allows" for you to be, or do, something you might not normally do — an established feature of brand. For an additional example, turning to a cosmetic brand project conducted in primarily Asian markets: a female participant in Bankok responded, "It makes me feel emotional, safe – it makes me feel like they can take care of us in every way. I am happy that they can help other people."  In the same project, another participant in New York echoed her sentiment, "This is about being invincible.  It is beyond strong.  It is saying no matter what happens you can take anything at all. You are invincible." The brand conveys its basic promises and attributes to the consumer, who, in turn, interprets and engages them in their own individual way. On a material product level, the brand "tool" may be the "same," but the moment it comes into contact with the consumer it becomes *their* tool, their unique property to interpret and engage in whatever way they see fit. Brand as a flexible tool to augment identity is undoubtedly one of its most salient features, but also a site where we can see very clearly the way that individuals engage and use brand.

Moving beyond brand as a tool for augmentation, as this is really only the outermost layer of the way brand invokes and engages consumer identity, we approach a deeper analysis of brand where there is much more at stake. Brand engagement naturally has a varied range; your attachment to the BMW you've

saved up for 20 years is going to be different than your attachment to the brand of deodorant you use. The brand reflects back the same level of emotional wattage of a consumers's engagement—it is a kind of personal mirror. The closer we get to commodities that have higher socio-cultural stakes, brand becomes more explicitly engaged with a more intimate individual identity and, in turn, the creation and externalization of identity. This is especially true with brands in categories that are predictably associated with status and image — things that are, in general, more external or "public," such as cars, clothes, and alcohol. Projects that deal with brands of this nature more readily evoke a far more personal and intimate engagement with brand. For example, a recent project for a financial corporation evoked highly aspirational engagement with the brand that eclipsed mere financial success — to activate and elicit personal aspirations and desires that consumers associated with the brand, and in turn, themselves. As one male participant in Atlanta put it, "(blank) leads to excitement. Fulfillment.  A key to unlocking future possibilities. An emotional space worrying about life goals. All about personal experience and the investment in self. I want to improve.  I'm a high school teacher, but I'm getting these great educational goals. I have some big projects brewing at any given time." Another participant in the same project in Seattle corroborated, "(Blank) is there for you to better experience life. I would probably save the money, then go and do it. I think they want you to think about – why wait? Why not do these things now? Here's this card to better experience life. These other cards won't do it for you." Still another participant from a different Seattle group responded, "A whole new mood. More of a unique spending atmosphere. Be more active. Actually do what you say you're going to do. This is serious living. Plan it. Do it. Let's move on to the next thing. Made me want to plan an outing with my card."

Who would think that a card's brand would make such a difference or have such an effect?  After all, at the basic product level they're really all doing the exact same thing, but they're branding it and thereby "voicing" it differently. In this high social value kind of market, category branding is almost always ratcheted up, and we clearly see why. The deeper a brand finds itself inside a consumer's identity, the more space there is for the consumer to assert themselves and engage in a deeper emotional way. That said, surprisingly, it is not always easy to predict what products and brands individuals consider to be

essential to who they are. While brand's role in self-creation can be more visible and explicit in more socially charged commodities, it is present at all levels of the consumer/brand engagement. After all, the project of self-creation is deeply personal and varies from individual to individual. A brand that means nothing to one person's identity could easily be seen as an essential part for another—as our stratified focus groups demonstrate time and time again. Some of the most seemingly mundane brands have yielded incredible insight into how deeply consumers engage with brand and the imagery they have created. Just as self-creation is an extremely personal thing, our project's engagement with brand is a reflection of this same quality.

Brand confers agency to the consumer in our modern marketplace insofar as we pick and choose what particular brand we consume. Implicit in this choice is, more often than not, a choice of what brand fits best with an individual's perceived identity. Brand, more importantly, confers agency to a consumer when the consumer recognizes that the brand is speaking to *them*, and, seemingly, to *them alone*. Even while brand is projecting itself onto millions of consumers, the average consumer nevertheless feels *spoken to* by virtue of the fact that they—consciously or not— allow certain brands entry, while simultaneously tuning out the overwhelming clamor of the rest. Even within this mass-produced object with its mass-produced brand, each individual will necessarily have their own unique engagement with its brand. Suggesting that we all consume the same brand seems tantamount to suggesting that consumers have no individuality. To illustrate: when I see myself in a brand, I am effectively translating a meaning and making it my own. I am engaging in an interactive process—no matter how large or small—of self-creation. If we reduce agency to its essential definition and connect it with brand, we find a device of "free choice," which is exactly what our modern marketplace seems to be offering up.

Today, we are witnessing an explosion of brand. It has massively proliferated across the marketplace, taking on many forms: entrepreneurship and the start-up, the new digital marketplace, and an increasingly globalized marketplace. With our working binary model of consumer/brand, it is only logical that the more consumers there are, the more brands there will be. Furthermore, we are living in a time of rapid social change, where large swaths of consumers who were previously ignored are just now

beginning to find themselves acknowledged and "spoken to" by the brand. Whether it is changing social conditions, or marketers finally realizing that they have ignored a massive block of potential consumers, we cannot say with absolute certainty. What we can say is that there is a recent and significant upsurge in the creation of brands that are specifically marketed to target previously-marginalized minority groups. After all, it was only in 2009 that "Black Barbie" made her debut. To this day, large corporations are scrambling to "catch up," creating products—cosmetics, toys, clothing etc.—specifically marketed to African Americans, as well as other previously "ignored" consumer groups. Flavored alcoholic beverages, from vodkas to ciders, are attracting countless new female drinkers. Here, by virtue of being ushered into, and recognized by, the marketplace, brand has had an empowering effect. If we take it that the brand already inherently confers agency to its consumer via the consumer recognizing or "hearing" that they are being "spoken to," then it follows that individual consumers — who had previously never felt directly acknowledged by the marketplace, but now feel that they are being recognized, valued, and spoken to for the first time — would feel an especially powerful sense of agency.

This sense of agency — both the general agency of being spoken to by a brand, as well as the heightened agency produced when a previously "ignored" consumer is finally being acknowledge by the brand in the marketplace — is a phenomena that is evident in focus groups with African Americans and Latinos in the U.S. We see that the subject of brand's involvement in the question of agency is a complex and layered one — perhaps, a question we cannot fully address. However, while we are more hesitant to make any strong claims about the socio-political ramifications in relation to agency and brand, we are not shying away from our assertion that, on a fundamental level, brand confers upon its consumer some degree of agency solely by virtue of the consumer *choosing* the brand that they felt better fit their identity, and that this sense of agency is only heightened when that consumer had previously not been addressed by the brand marketplace. This said, our project cannot sidestep the question of socio-political agency even if we don't have a fully developed answer. One particularly illustrative example of this "socio-political agency" via brand was a media project that conducted focus groups across major cities in South America. Speaking to focus groups comprised solely of women, the major theme that arose across almost

every marketplace (with the exception of Argentina) was that women felt as though they were being invited into the public sphere for the first time because they recognized that they were being spoken to—for the first time— by brands in the branded advertisements they were beginning to see. The most common theme was that women were being invited to leave the narrow confines of a traditional marriage and household responsibility, and step into the "outside world," a place that previously was not a place for most of these women. The irony of this, of course, is that they received this message and continue to receive it *from* inside the home—from the television. However, as we have touched upon, all of this increasing proliferation of media—which is the primary conduit of brand advertising across the globe — has everything to do with the rise of brand. As a Colombian woman put it, "Today it is easier for us, we have more knowledge, in the past everything was harder." More directly relating to the subject of agency, a Brazilian woman said, "You want to learn new things, you step out of your little world and you look for different things…I tried looking for different things and people said it was too much, and I wanted to improve something. You want to have your life make more sense. You can't stay in the house, you have to get out there - so you need to know a lot about everything - so I am like that - I try to learn different things." Here, it is the proliferation of knowledge via the television, but also branded advertising, that is inviting women to "leave the house" and step into the world — an invitation that is, by and large, a by-product of a corporation's attempt to make more money. As our report notes, women are already entering the marketplace feeling, for the first time, that they are being invited — a result of brands creating advertisements targeted specifically at women. Our recommendation was to get on this trend.

While there are complex social factors and histories that we cannot entirely account for, what we can report is that across metropolitan cities in Latin America, women—especially those from a lower income bracket— in a relatively short amount of time, felt increasingly empowered by a media environment that was recognizing them for the first time and speaking to them, and which was universally framed as a sort of invitation to leave the traditional place for women and step into the outside world. In other words, branded advertising played a major role in witnessing, inviting, and calling women to see themselves differently—which they happily did. Putting motivations aside, there was no doubt that the

emergence of brands and their advertisements targeting women was a major factor. It was here, through the medium of television, that these women were, for the first time, being "heard," recognized, and wanted, by the marketplace, the traditional domain of men.  Here, the brand undoubtably contributed significantly in empowering women with newfound agency. Without making any value judgments, it is fair to say that this example reveals the incredible power brand has, to engage and be engaged with, to create the possibility of a new kind of agency and a new understanding of selfhood.

To posit a stronger suggestion, in our project we saw the emergence of women not through a social upheaval—in stark contrast to the U.S.'s social revolution in the 60's— but through a "marketing revolution." Here, marketing is seemingly sidestepping the "political," and appears to be emancipating women through the agentic power of the brand. In this context, the agency conferred by brand seems to have taken on an entirely new dimension insofar as the consumers were invited to leave the home and enter the unfamiliar world of the marketplace, and step into a new social platform. What seems completely novel is that women were given this new agency, by brand, essentially through a process of learning *from* the brand. Brand had seemingly created a new space for women, but the only source of knowledge for learning *how* to act in this new space also came from brand, implicitly forcing women to identify *as* brand, insofar as brand seemed the singular source of this "new" identity. Women talked about how they were "learning" or being "prepared" for an entry into this new way of "being."  While there are undoubtedly other factors at play here, the new brand landscape was continually framed by participants as both the provocateur (and creator) and the "teacher" (also a kind of creator) of this new construction of self in the "outside world." While we clearly see brand as creating a new kind of agency and selfhood, there are deeper dimensions—such as brand presenting a new model of self— that cannot be authoritatively spoken about. Yet, even if we cannot speak authoritatively, it is necessary to mark this as a place where, by all accounts, it seems as though participants are engaging the self-constructive and agentic qualities of brand on a still deeper level insofar as they are learning a new kind personhood under the tutelage of brand. In this sense of modeling themselves after brand, are these participants, in some way or another, "self-branding?"

To conclude our analysis of the intersection of brand and identity, we turn to what is, by all accounts, the latest development of the brand. In this form, brand is fully aware of what it is, how it works, and what it does. This is the intersection of self and brand. The idea of "personal branding" is not a foreign word or concept. There are some articles on the subject, mostly from the business side, with one exception. Anthropologist Ilana Gershon touches on the subject of "personal branding" in her 2014 article *Selling Your Self in the United States*. However, Gershon has already taken and accepted both "personal branding' and her reformulation, "corporate personhood branding," to be a starting place, and doesn't appear to be interested in the *social implications* of phenomenons more broadly, but rather in a textbook-esque analysis of the "breakdowns" associated with the individual attempting "corporate personhood," illustrating the difficulties with embodying a cohesive branded identity across multiple platforms in the corporate context. What I mean here is that Gershon, among other academics, are responding to the rise of "personal branding" as though it were just another trend in business and hiring practices, without reflexively questioning the cultural significance of individuals attempting to become "brands." Gershon briefly engages with the anthropological discourse of brand, yet fails to highlight or address what a significant development personal branding is, even as the semiotic connection between product/brand becomes individual/brand. The phenomena of "corporate personhood branding" should not be anthropologically engaged before the phenomena of "personal branding," as this is a move to the specific without first accounting for the more general phenomena. The vast majority of Americans who engage the practices of "personal branding" on some level or another, are not doing so in a corporate context—this is a fundamental disagreement. Furthermore, Gershon and others who write on "personal branding" from the business angle, are writing about a "sanitized" phenomena where the framework of brand has attracted crude attempts to copy or co-opt the most superficial elements of brand, and where the individual, in Gershon's words is "expected to behave as a brand" — for example, perform a consistent and recognizable, yet fluid, identity. Individuals are only expected to behave as a brand on the most superficial level; they are expected to present themselves in a cohesive and attractive way. However, this is not what brand does on a corporate level, nor does it do justice to how individuals engage with brand.

Here, the quickly-becoming-buzzword "brand" is nothing more than an attractive model or analogy to employ. In short, these articles on "personal branding" are already working with a stilted conception of brand in every sense of the word, and, although our projects share the same words—"person" and "brand"—, we might as well be speaking different languages, as our engagements of "person" and "brand" are on completely different levels.

Missing the mark of attempting to engage with the implications of a world where brand is not only untethered from product but, in some bizarre inversion, attached to its consumer, we have to begin at a more basic level. The emergence of personal or self-branding is not necessarily a surprise for a generation that has grown up in a world where almost everything is marketed and made with a brand meaning. Manning coined the term "dematerialization" of brand to describe a separation from product and brand.  Now this language of "dematerialization" seems to require a wider range, as the meaning of brand itself has seemingly been detached from its traditional context. Drawing from our media work over the years, the framework of the brand appears to be increasingly interpolated into an understanding of the self. We most clearly see this if we look into our increasingly social-media-dominated lives. To introduce our major themes, we turn to a mid-2000's project on the media habits of teenage girls that surveyed multiple markets wherein one of the most poignant themes was the commonly-held belief that an individual's social media page was a more "authentic" articulation of self—the articulation of identity as if it were a brand.  In short, it appeared as though, for these participants, the locus of identity was no longer physical, it was virtual; and one's essence was articulated within one's brand, and not their physical self. Here, the rise of social media had seemingly created a necessity for creating and curating one's identity. As one participant summed it up, "If you hung out with me for 10-15 minutes, I wouldn't tell you that much. It's like, what would I say?  I think that Instagram tells my life story in pictures." With social media being one of the most important social "spaces," it has seemingly altered the way these participants  imagined, created themselves, and *conducted* themselves in the social sphere. Social media presents itself as an increasingly important social site with significant attraction, that our social interactions, and even our externalization and sense of self, lack—control. As one teenager put it, "It's a

social world. You don't have to be direct all the time…You can be whoever you want with Instagram or Twitter." The theme of control dominates, "With social media you are the one doing this story. You feel more accomplishment when you do it." Some described the pressures of "presenting yourself" on social media to be burdensome, but obligatory, while others seemed to relish the control over their social life that can only be found within social media. The theme that complimented this sense of "control" was the idea that, on social media you are able to build yourself; as one participant put it, "It's like daydreaming, you're building yourself." Another participant echoes her, "You want to personalize what is coming in and going out. It's personal time, like dreaming, You're building yourself and your knowledge." All these quotes are from stratified groups and markets. Here, the notion of any authentic self is secondary or entirely absent from the constructed self that is built and controlled through social media. One young woman in a group said she needed to reinvent her brand over the weekend, and was planning to give her entire Facebook page a total re-vamp towards that end. Individuals would clearly articulate an image that they were seeking to construct, and how, and why, they were doing it. Working in marketing, hearing this articulation is uncanny, but at the same time it seems a plausible progression. The branded media-scape has, perhaps, relayed the brand message so effectively that it has "taught" us the brand. Consciously or unconsciously, there has been—to some degree—  an interpellation of brand into our everyday lives. The implicit scaffolding of brand—creation, message, control—has seemingly seeped into our collective psyche.

Brand has proven itself to be such a powerful device for consumers in the general project of self-creation, directly by virtue of the recognition—conscious or not— of a relational engagement with brand. Consumers have recognized that they are spoken to and heard, and on a fundamental level that brand confers upon its consumer some degree of agency solely by virtue of the consumer *choosing* the brand that they feel will better fit their identity. When I see myself in a brand, I am effectively translating a meaning and making it my own. I am engaging in a process—no matter how large or small—of self creation through a distinctly *relational* engagement with brand. Thus, the brand, however it is understood by the consumer, has become associated with an agency over the self. Brand is already an explicit part of

our identity in its product form, but as brand is increasingly recognized as a powerful vehicle to confer agency over the self, the brand has seemingly begun to take on a new object form—the individual. This can be seen in the superficial pop-culture discourse of "personal-branding," but we see an entirely different, and more intimate, picture when individuals begin to talk about creating and projecting a cohesive personal image and identity via social media. Essentially, these individuals are treating a part, or parts, of their identity as if it were a brand. In an analogous process to the marketers, these individuals are designing their brand around their "social consumer," attempting to anticipate the dimensional identity that the "social consumer" wants or expects to see, and then modeling and constructing a cohesive identity—in the same way a brand would—that is appealing to the social consumer. Now, these claims being made here are the result of observations and analysis that were conducted 11 years ago—we must imagine that much has changed. Since this project, the social force of brand has increased exponentially. This, of course, is coupled with the emergence and massive proliferation of new technologies and media—the smartphone, new social media platforms—which have created an increasingly "wired in" culture. Brand, in its classical definition, has not only been strengthened, but we also see that the intersection of brand and identity has taken on a new emergent form—identity *as* brand. Here, our project of understanding how brand works as a device of self-creation and externalization is our foundation for not only understanding brand as it *is,* but also brand as it *will* be—where it is going. The formulation of brand which we have identified will serve us in critically engaging the fundamental question of what it means for the individual to coexist with the increasingly branded world.

**CONCLUSION**

**Not Just What Brand *Is*, but Where Brand is G*oing***

Our philosophical component of this project began by tracing a figurative crack in the writing of Plato and Aristotle, identifying a pervasive difficulty in engaging with the question of exactly what makes property essential yet problematic. Identifying this fundamental tension affixed to property, Marx's framework then supplied an essential insight, shedding light on this unspoken tension—the notion that property always exists in a social context. Marx's commodity inherently encodes the social context of the product. As Marx reveals, the tension inherent in commodity evolves around its fetishism, and the social relations involved in production appear as alienated economic relationships of exchange. In essence, the instability or tension inherent in the commodity is a product of a void created by the rupture of social meaning and economic meaning. Our project put forward the idea that the *brand*—as a device of meaning making—would inevitably gravitate towards this Marxian void between consumer and commodity, and present the possibility of reinventing the alienated and abstracted commodity. In short, our philosophical engagement identified the salient characteristic of the commodity to be its social meaning— encoded as brand. More importantly however, beginning our project through a philosophic analysis revealed the chimeric character of the brand — a thing that appears so naturalized and basic in the human imagination, yet simultaneously intangible. Our anthropological analysis began with brand as a relationship between consumer and brand, and our provocation emerged out of an insistence on a situated analysis of the intersection of brand and identity, presenting that brand serves as a dynamic vehicle for self-creation— constructing and externalizing identity as well as conferring agency to the consumer. When you see yourself recognized by a brand, you are effectively translating a meaning and making it your own, engaging in a process—no matter how large or small—of self-creation. I have argued that, in the relational engagement with brand, consumers have recognized that they are spoken to and heard, and that, on a fundamental level, brand confers upon its consumer some degree of agency, solely by virtue of the consumer *choosing* the brand that aligns with their identity. However, our journey to discover a new understanding of brand has not simply been for the sake of presenting something "new," but has also been

a way to critically engage what this new understanding of brand might mean on a deeper level for the all-too-often ignored individual consumer.

While our project reveals a new way of understanding brand, what is really at stake here is, quite simply, that through the project of understanding the brand, we see the possibility for understanding *ourselves* on an individual level. In our modern consumer society, the existential tension and instability inherent in the construction and externalization of personal identity is fundamentally intertwined with the brand as we inhabit a world where the brand *is* the prevailing medium for the essential task of personal meaning making. Thus, it seems as though the instability of not just the consumer/brand relationship, but also the more fundamental individual/property relationship—that we saw in Plato and Aristotle—, is directly related to the instability inherent in the human experience of "being," of constructing and externalizing *our meaning*. The usage of brand as a device for the articulation and externalization of identity is as varied as the ever-changing multitude of identities that populate our planet. We create and are created by the world that we live in—nothing, today, illustrates this more clearly than the brand.

The utility of our project in understanding and engaging brand requires us to return to the self, and consider—through a new perspective—how individual engagements with brand are another way of understanding "the self." As our project grounds our conception of brand not only in the implicit need for the externalization of the self but also an externalization via the "other," Hegel's seminal 1809 text *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is the natural place to turn. Hegel notably predicated his philosophical framework on the fundamental need for human externalization in the world coupled with a metaphysics of material. This alone makes Hegel uniquely valuable in analyzing the amalgamation of identity and material that is the brand. For our purposes, Hegel's endowing material with physical and sensual qualities is perhaps more important for its negation of material; under a Hegelian conception, material has no inherent qualities beyond its physical properties, and from this "emptiness" springs the human need to give and create meaning and order to the world of things. To describe, on the most cursory level, Hegel's phenomenology: before externalization, Hegel begins with self-containment, where the self only sees the self; however, as soon as we learn of our incompleteness, we require externalization. The subject (self)

recognizes the need for object (other), and seeks unification. The desire to externalize and instantiate oneself is overwhelming (Hegel, 18). In its simplest form, externalization as an active action is a ceaseless process where we construct and re-construct the self in an endless cycle. Unlike Hegel and many other philosophers, our project took the necessity of the externalization of self as a starting point; however, engagement with brand is also an act of externalization or self-creation. And, as Hegel evidences, this process of externalization—where we construct and re-construct our identifies—is not at all unlike our everyday engagement with brand as we construct and augment our identities. Most importantly, Hegel's construction of externalization as an overwhelming desire to be recognized by the "other," appears as a direct mirror of our assertion that brand efficacy is a direct result of the consumer feeling "recognized" or "spoken to" by brand.

Hegel establishes a consideration of a phenomenological construction of individual and material, by establishing material as purely physical—and nothing else—, thus requiring interpretation and the creation of "meaning." As Hegel writes, "Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged" (Hegel, 111). Turning to Hegel's "Master Slave Dialectic," on closer examination, it is a unique moment in Hegel's project where the externalization of the self in relation to the other is joined with Hegel's materialism. At first glance, Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic exemplifies the struggle for externalization; the self comes into contact with the "other" and immediately recognizes its incompleteness. In an attempt to make itself whole again, through the domination and possession of the other, a violent struggle ensues. However, we find that the slave, who was seemingly subjugated, is able to free himself. As Hegel shows, one of the primary mechanisms for this escape from bondage via externalization comes about *through* the creation of material and the recognition of oneself in the material "other" that has been created. As Hegel writes, "…in fashioning the thing, he becomes aware that being-for-self belongs to him, that he himself exists essentially and actually in his own right. The shape does not become something other than himself through being made external to him; for it is precisely this shape that is his pure self—for—being, which in this externality is seen by him to be the truth" (Hegel, 194). This externalization is the ultimate goal of

recognition, the act of seeing the self in other. The self does not simply come to recognize itself through some unmediated realization, but rather this recognition of independence and externality is *constructed* through a union with the thing, illustrating that externalization of the self is possible through material. One of the most immediate things Hegel's text affirms for us is that the creation and externalization of self as an endless process of constructing and reconstructing the self in relation to the "other" is a fundamental part of human identity, and it is increasingly clear that brand acts as this material "other." And as we live in an increasingly material world with the advent of now-globalized consumerism, the brand as the "other" becomes a larger part of our daily lives. Furthermore, Hegel's master/slave dichotomy mirrors the common post-Marxian corporation/consumer dichotomy that Critical Theory perpetuates, when in reality individuals are re-shaping and externalizing what appears as a ready-made brand—we are not a slave to the brand. Hegel allows us one final reconsideration of what it could mean to recognize and understand the brand. Through recognizing the internal power of the brand in our everyday lives in its specific manifestations and mechanisms, the individual is even further empowered to dictate their relationship with brand and the systems of capitalism it represents—as we are beginning to see already.

This is where our project has led us: the understanding that brand cannot be an external analytical object. When we look at the brand landscapes we are looking at a kind of tapestry comprised of individual needs, wants, and desires—reflecting a kaleidoscope of self-created, collectively-sourced identity. The real power of brand is derived not from the marketers who create it, but from the fundamental human need for *meaning*. On the subject of meaning, the millennial generation, shaped by a mind-blowing transformation in communication technology, has created a forum for the display and even aggrandizement and proliferation of identity, but also the democratization of knowledge and information, leading to the demise of clear, credentialed authority. In this vacuum of a once-collective authority structure, brand has stepped in and displaced the societal and authoritative structures that helped provide the grist for identity creation. In so doing, brand has attained a quasi-spiritual dimension as an object of power, meaning and worship. In our modern technologized society, where the traditional structures in the

construction individual "meaning" are slowly eroding —religion, social intimacy, and clear collective cultural values—, the brand increasingly appears to fill this void. Just a mere generation ago, the majority of young people developed most of their beliefs, values, knowledge and identities from their parents, family and local community. The world-wide web, our new collective commons, is now still less than 25 years old. Yet today, young people have access to information, media, answers and different perspectives from all corners of the universe. In other words, they now have unparalleled access, and in turn the possibility of sourcing a completely "new" formulation of personal agency. It is in this new uncharted territory of identity creation that brand has become one of the most dynamic drivers or vehicles for meaning in our highly-mediated social context.

We find ourselves in uncharted territory for both identity creation and brand. Nothing illustrates this more poignantly than the rise of "self-branding." The brand and its meaning and power, which has traditionally belonged to the power-brokers of business, is being reclaimed and repurposed by the consumer who realizes— *now I, too, can wield brand*. In this new uncharted territory of self-creation, identity has not only been rediscovered and self-created, but brand has also given us a model for a whole new kind of social projection and promotion of our identity. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and more, all represent this nexus of self-publication. The 'identity' of brand has always been a more fluid medium, but now — coupled with the rise of new and powerful social media vehicles, an environment in which the brand thrives— there is a whole new venue that invites us to wield brand, to create and project our identity as a brand. The erosion of the old structures that served as the basis for identity-creation are quickly being supplanted by a new ever-changing world of limitless access to information which, in turn, invokes the possibility of a new formulation for identity creation to match this new world. Suddenly we have the immense free-wheeling power of the brand, and we find ourselves in an unprecedented era of self-creation through brand. It seems necessary to ask, where does it go from here? Since we create identity through the agency of brand, and then have the capacity to harness this personal brand, the next logical step seems to be an even stronger identity that is free and untethered in our new mediated world.

So, what happens when individuals become brands? While we may still be at the threshold of the era of "self-branding," the average person is certainly engaging with, and closely observing and learning from, a mass of individuals who act as brands. It is nearly impossible to think of any prominent cultural figure today who has not leveraged "self-branding" via social media to create and project their identity to the masses, from Kim Kardashian and Caitlin Jenner to Neil deGrasse Tyson, Julian Assange, Michael Moore and so on. It is worth wondering: having followed brand this far, where will we be led next?

**Follow the Leader- The Rise of the Trump Brand**

There is no more poignantly-charged exemplar of this cultural turn away from the traditional forms of knowledge, agency and identity, than Trump. While Trump is the most extreme and perhaps *mutant* example, more than anyone else he signifies this break. Trump transgressed the status quo throughout his successful bid for presidency at every point. A celebrity businessman well-versed in the power of brand, Trump, the individual, has been subsumed by the "Trump brand" — a brand of his own creation. He therefore best exemplifies the unhinged power of personal brand on media steroids. On Twitter, where anything can be said and anything can be retracted, Trump creates and embodies a new kind of authority: an authority grounded squarely in the powerful brand he has created for himself, and leveraging an agency and authority as a successful businessman and political outsider who says the things that most of us *think* but are too scared to say. Anti-status quo on every level, Trump speaks his mind however, and whenever, he wants. He has wholly ceded his identity and selfhood to his brand. Trump has created and managed a mobile brand**,** and has "broadcast" it through Twitter, in the same way any other person might—except that he has millions of followers. While Twitter is his personal platform of choice, his brand is picked up and proliferated across the complete spectrum of media to make the impact of his brand a global phenomenon. His authority and legitimacy as a candidate and an individual are fabricated by this personal brand that he creates and perpetuates. Throughout the campaign and into his presidency, Trump capitalized ruthlessly on the mistrust of the traditionally unquestionable authority of the media and political experts, creating his own fabricated truths on the authority of his word alone, all the while branding and dismissing all negative information and reporting as "fake-news." Trump, as a branded

personality, exemplifies the fluidity and continual re-creation of self that the brand allows: falling back on previous promises, making outlandish claims and then retracting or reconstructing them; his tweets alone become the headlines on the front pages of every major news source. The instability of "knowledge" and "fact" in a post-Trump world is the direct product of the instability of the new kind of agentic identity that brand allows us to wield—here, in a very extreme form. The branding of the self is intertwined with the new technologized paradigm shift of knowledge and identity creation—the question of where authority and agency, where "truth," comes from, is all on the table.

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Today, we travel through a mediascape of brand where the messages are projected into our mind every time we take the subway, read a magazine, watch TV, and browse the internet. And yet, we are not passive journeymen through our environment. Each of us have become carriers and purveyors of brand: we wear it, we use it, we say it, and we wield it personally. Brand simultaneously exists everywhere and nowhere. Speaking to you in your own voice, brand recognizes you, and *you* recognize yourself in the *other* as it appears in you—in this moment you have *become* brand—**;** this is the magic of brand. Increasingly, as individuals begin to recognize and wield the alchemy that is brand in their own unique way, the understanding of what it means to be an individual is intertwined with the questions of brand. We create and are created by the increasingly brand-driven world that we live in. Already we lag far behind the ever-shifting chimeric brand phenomena; there is not a moment to waste. The time to critically engage the alchemy of brand is *now*.

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