

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

The Thing about *Trust*

ANNE LAMBRIGHT

ANNE LAMBRIGHT (Chickasaw Nation) is Paul Mellon Distinguished Professor of Hispanic Studies and head of Modern Languages at Carnegie Mellon University. Her scholarship centers on contemporary Andean studies, Native American and Indigenous studies, and human rights. Her current work includes a project on contemporary transnational Quechua cultural production and a study of the Chickasaw storyteller Te Ata's international travels as a case of incipient global indigeneity.

In “Bonds,” the novel-within-a-novel in Hernan Diaz’s *Trust*, Helen Rask, née Brevoort, is introduced to the reader as a precocious child who becomes a commodity for both her father and her mother, though for each in a different way. For her father, Helen is raw material, both “pupil” and “object of study” (30), and she molds herself to satisfy and also undermine his increasingly bizarre scholarly expectations. For her mother, Helen is social capital, a novelty paraded through elite circles of fellow US expats in Europe, performing parlor tricks to help maintain the family. Because of her impressive intellectual acrobatics, the reader learns, Helen Brevoort “became somewhat of a ‘thing’” (39). That rather common phrase might go unnoticed were it not for the appearance of the word, again in quotation marks, just a few pages later, when the narrator conveys Mrs. Brevoort’s opinion that, “‘Things’ should simply ‘work’” (42). In this instance, the things referred to are the mechanics of social life, but, as the narration itself suggests, the term could refer to a myriad of factors that affect our lives. These two conspicuous instances of the word *thing* call attention to and beg a consideration of the things that populate, implicitly or explicitly, the four distinct narratives that make up *Trust*.

While most reviews of *Trust* treat the novel as primarily a story about Benjamin Rask and his “real-life” counterpart, Andrew Bevel, Diaz suggests in an interview that Helen and Mildred are not supporting characters:

I find, reading about wealth in America, both in history and in fiction, women have been completely and utterly erased from those narratives. If they appear in narratives of wealth, it is with mostly three pre-assigned roles—either as wives, as secretaries or as victims. And I was interested

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in taking all these three positions, these stereotypical positions, and subverting them. (“Hernan Diaz”)

By following the treatment of “things” through the four narratives that make up *Trust*, one gets a sense of the direction of that subversion. Indeed, throughout the novel, things, thingness, and attention to things are disproportionately associated with women, while the character Helen Rask / Mildred Bevel is the thing that haunts, moves, grounds, and finally subverts the stories being told. In the complex intertwining of money and art, finance capital and creative production, that is the novel *Trust*, Helen/Mildred is the thing that holds it together and ultimately unravels it.

A closer examination of a few examples of objects and things in each of the four narratives helps illustrate this point. In his articulation of a “thing theory,” Bill Brown observes:

As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A thing, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We must confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us. . . . The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (4)

Reading the objects and things—commodities, collectibles, and capital goods—as portrayed by the narrators Harold Vanner, Andrew Bevel, Ida Partenza, and, ultimately, Mildred Bevel herself, allows us to look through the various fictions—literary, capitalist—that the novel confronts, and center on the thing, the thingness of things, and the relations they shed light on.

The first section, the novel “Bonds” by Harold Vanner, narrates the rise of Benjamin Rask as a legendary finance capitalist in the early twentieth

century. The descendent of a long line of wealthy businessmen, Rask was bored and directionless until he, somewhat haphazardly, fell into investing, and, the reader is told, “became fascinated by the contortions of money—how it could be made to bend back on itself to be force-fed its own body” (14). In an oft-quoted line, we learn that Benjamin’s passion for finance stems from “the fact that he viewed capital as an antiseptically living *thing*. It moves, eats, grows, breeds, falls ill, and may die” (14; emphasis added). As capital becomes a living thing, as the circulation and propagation of money becomes an end in itself, it distances itself from the material things (commodities) from which it once drew its value; “Bonds” explores and exploits the new value relations that made men like Rask. Indeed, in “Bonds,” for Benjamin, objects have lost particular meaning or value and are almost always simply categories of things—cigars, coins, cars. The reader can imagine the stratospheric levels of luxury and material refinement generally enjoyed by someone of Benjamin’s wealth, but in the novel, when associated with Benjamin, articles tend to be lumped into vague categories. For the most part, regarding Benjamin’s life, “Bonds” is devoid of what Bevel’s secretary, Ida Partenza, author of the third section of *Trust*, calls “those little details (a mundane object, a specific place) and verbal trinkets (a brand name, a mannerism) often used to bribe readers into believing that what they are reading is true” (310), as if the myth of men like Benjamin is such that our belief is a given.

The striking exception to this general rule comes in the initial description of the stock-trading frenzy, when Rask transforms the lower floors of his family brownstone into “makeshift” office space. Suddenly, objects become individualized and described in finer detail:

The furniture that had remained untouched and under covers for years was now handled irreverently by secretaries and errand boys. A stock ticker had been installed on the walnut serving table; quote boards covered most of the gilt-embossed foliage wallpaper; piles of newspapers had stained the straw-yellow velvet settee; a typewriter had dented a

satinwood bureau; black and red ink blotched the needlework upholstery of divans and sofas; cigarettes had burned the serpentine edges of a mahogany desk; hurried shoes scuffed oak claw feet and soiled, forever, Persian runners. (15)

Rask's objects acquire specificity as they lose their purpose, are misused or damaged—in other words, as they become *things*. In Benjamin's realm, things are particular, interesting, detailed, more *themselves*, when they don't work as intended. It is as if he does not understand or cannot relate to the concrete. Even so, Benjamin intuits that he should have a certain relationship to things, that society expects as much from him, and he therefore makes a "halfhearted attempt at starting different collections" (12). Rask's halfhearted collection of things is extended at the end of the first chapter of the novel, when "as he reached and passed what he thought was the midpoint of his life, a dim sense of genealogical responsibility, together with an even vaguer notion of propriety, made him consider marriage" (23). A "wife" seems both an item to be collected and an investment in the future, such that Helen becomes yet another thing in Rask's orbit, a living thing that "moves, eats, grows, breeds, falls ill, and may die," both constant and fictitious capital.

The narrator describes Helen's premarriage world—unlike Benjamin's—with specific details, situating her and her family materially and intellectually in a social milieu in which she's never quite comfortable. Her anointment as "somewhat of a 'thing'" comes directly after she has eschewed association with a collection of objects. In her first excursion away from her family, a stroll through an Italian town, she wanders into an outmoded photography studio, a place "stuck somewhere between the realms of science and art" (38). Saying "she should make an imposing Minerva," the photographer "unrolled a backdrop of the Parthenon, placed Helen in front of it, and rummaged through the props for a helmet, a spear, and a stuffed owl" (38). Helen, however, requests the photograph with "No costume. . . . No backdrop. Just her, standing there, in the shop" (38). Helen will yet again be labeled a thing when,

as a patient in a Swiss sanatorium, where Benjamin has taken charge of her care, a brutal convulsive therapy treatment leaves her "a thing broken and abandoned, exhausted of being" (115), a victim of Benjamin's obsessive need for control. Shortly thereafter, Helen dies; Benjamin's life remains largely unaltered, and she becomes "a Helen," a prestigious literary and music composition prize.

The narrator of the second part of the novel, "My Life," the autobiography of the financier Andrew Bevel, exhibits a similar disregard for material objects. As evidence of his refined taste, Andrew points to his "art collection, of which I shall speak later," but with one exception, he provides no details about his ownings; one of the many notes for future elaboration that mark the style of the text refers to "Art. Collecting, etc." (156). The country home his grandmother, Tommy, had built is described simply as a "magnificent Florentine villa" (144). Among the people given greatest descriptive attention are Bevel's mother, Grace, and wife, Mildred, but both are aligned with things through banal metaphors. Grace was "a beacon people turned to for a reminder of their best qualities and noblest aspirations . . . the beating heart not only of my parents' circle but of several . . . charitable associations" (145–46). Mildred "was my muse," whose "delicate health had given her the innocent yet profound wisdom of those who, like young children or the elderly, are close to the edges of existence" (157). Belying the true opulence of Bevel House, Andrew tells of the home occupying a block at 87th Street and Fifth Avenue where Mildred "settled in, infusing life and warmth in every room with her little touches" (162) and writes that "her greatest luxury was a cup of hot cocoa at the end of the day" (163). In Andrew's account, Mildred's interests include "French classics" and "mystery novels." When she falls ill, Bevel recalls that

a particularly charming hobby of hers consisted in reproducing the floral arrangements in some of our paintings to the very last detail. A vase in the background of an Ingres, Fragonard's gardens and all his nosegays and corsages, van Thielen's vivid garlands and bouquets, Boucher's cascading

blossoms . . . All these Mildred quite literally brought to life. Her passion was such that I even purchased some paintings by de Heem, Ruysch, van Aelst and other Dutch artists who specialized in flowers just to indulge Mildred's enchanting pastime. (164)

The reader later learns that this uncharacteristically detailed description was actually conceived by Bevel's secretary, Ida, hired to "bend and align reality" through creative embellishments regarding Mildred (288).

In one of the most animated sections of his narrative, Bevel begins to enumerate in rapid succession the many things that invaded US life—indicators of national prosperity—after World War I: incandescent lights, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, motion pictures, the wireless, automobiles, oil refineries, rubber factories, paved roads, trucks (175). The brisk delivery, in contrast to the rather languid, disinterested previous references to collections, builds up to this climactic affirmation: "But the greatest American industry of that time was finance" (175). And thus, Bevel pulls back from his apparent ode to material progress to refocus: "This was the force powering America's manufacturing. This is what financed all those dizzying technological innovations and their consumption. President Coolidge could not have said it better: 'The business of America is business'" (176). The text forms part of a larger defense of Andrew's actions as a financier and of free-market capitalism; the details of his maneuvers, with specific actions, statistics, names, and newspaper quotes contrast markedly with the subsequent laconism of the narrative's return to Bevel House: "Brief paragraph about Mildred, domestic delights. Home a solace during these happily frantic times" (178). Home as surplus value.

In contrast, objects gain specificity, detail, and life when experienced by others of lesser means and lower social status. Ida Partenza's "A Memoir, Remembered" is populated by things and descriptions of things—her outdated, drab clothing; her "secondhand Royal portable" typewriter whose "'e' was a bit over-inked, with a blacked-out eye, and the 'i' often undotted" (263); her father's printing utensils; their inadequate household goods. As

opposed to Mildred's "French classics" and "mysteries," we have detailed descriptions of *The Carrol Gardens Weekly*, which Ida and her father edited, as well as numerous lists of the authors that Ida read as research for her work for Bevel. Through Ida, we see the materiality with which Bevel's obscene wealth manifested itself. She first observes Bevel's office building while waiting in line with other Depression-era women applying for a secretarial position: "stern, clean lines coursed up the limestone panels only to be interrupted by copper cornices with overly ornate tracery, gothic arches and busts of futuristic-looking gladiators. Greedily, comically, the building claimed all of history for itself—not just the past but also the world to come" (199–200). Inside the building, where she felt she did not belong, "[t]he walls of green marble vanished toward a remote ceiling. What was not made of stone was made of bronze. Nothing shone but everything emitted a pale glow. Sounds had a tactile quality, and we all did our best not to litter the space with audible objects of our own" (211–12). In contrast to Vanner's and Bevel's narrations, Ida's centers on the material, giving even the immaterial a materiality, as if recovering the thing marginalized in the previous narrations and, particularly, by finance capitalism.

The loss of the concrete in the market economy is deplored by Ida's anarchist father, who "detested finance capital, which he viewed as the source of every social injustice" (215). Ida tells the reader that her father agreed with Marx on but one issue: "Money is a fantastic commodity. You can't eat or wear money, but it represents all the food and clothes in the world. This is why it's a fiction . . . money is a fiction . . . and this is doubly true of finance capital" (216). Ida's father continues, "Money, he says, is not one thing. It is, potentially, all things. And, for this reason it is unrelated to all things" (217). While she challenges her father on this apagogical argument, Ida will nonetheless summon his words to impress Bevel in her interview, thus securing the position and gaining access to Bevel's private life and spaces. There Ida encounters Mildred and determines to uncover the truth about her, while simultaneously cocreating the

fictitious Mildred manufactured by Bevel in his autobiography.

Among the most intimate and detailed descriptions Ida provides of Bevel House are those of Mildred's rooms, which Andrew had left untouched and officially off-limits to Ida, who tricks the housekeeper into giving her access. Ida is surprised by what she encounters:

The bedroom, between a parlor and a dressing room, was an angular cloud—all light blue and gray and sunshine and somehow ozone-smelling. A bed that was a rectangle. A nightstand that was a cube. A coffee table that was a circle. In a corner, a few clean curves resolved themselves into an armchair. All these pieces of furniture were so elemental they appear colorless in my memory. Mere abstract lines.

The sitting room was just as serene and uncluttered. The desk and the chair had been realized with the absolute minimum of elements required for a desk to be a desk and a chair to be a chair. (329)

From her analysis of the room, Ida confirms her suspicions about Andrew's description of his wife:

These were not the "soft," "warm," spaces of someone who "made a home" for her husband. These were not the quarters of a sickly child-bride. In contrast with the rest of the house there was a monastic sort of calm here. The few pieces of furniture derived their elegance from their quiet functionality. And the intensity of the place came from the impression that every object (and its placement) was logically necessary. (329–30)

Ida found none of the personal journals she expected, given Vanner's depiction of an obsessively journaling Helen, but she did find evidence of a voracious reader with books in French, German, and Italian that were "heavily underlined in pencil, dogeared, spotted with tea or coffee" (330). Finally, Ida ruffles through Mildred's desk drawer, finding writing instruments and materials and eventually swiping a blotting paper "covered in a multitude of words, numbers and symbols traced and retraced chaotically on top of one another in purple ink. Everything was backward, of course. I thought of my father and his inverted truth" (330). These

items provide the first pieces of evidence of what might have been the truth of Mildred Bevel, a glimpse into her mind through her things before we confront her words.

In Ida's memoir, the reader first encounters Bevel House as a museum—the memoir begins with Ida returning to the mansion, recently opened to the public, decades after her work with Andrew—and later as an archive—intermittent chapters find Ida in the house-museum's reading room, searching through Mildred's papers to discover "who she might have been" (356). There, she finds a slim diary, titled "Futures," in Mildred's handwriting. Ida recounts, "The first few sheets have been ripped out. The remaining pages contain short paragraphs and isolated lines in purple ink. There is a pressed leaf halfway into the notebook. The ghost of a leaf, rather—translucent veins in a pale red frame" (357). The phantom object appears almost as Mildred herself, the ghost who has haunted the previous pages.

Diaz recounts that he imagined Mildred's diary as a "modernist cabinet of curiosities of sorts" ("Writing"). Precursors of the modern museum, cabinets of curiosities, *Wunderkammern*, were collections of *things*, of objects alienated from their purpose, designed both to signal social status and to delight and entertain through their synecdochic and indexical displays of the wonders of the world. Responding to Stephen Greenblatt's suggestion that modern museums aim to elicit either resonance or wonder, Steven Lubar notes that "[c]abinets of curiosity did both at the same time. The worldview of the time found wonder in resonance; it saw linkages between things, and between things and spirit and nature, everywhere. Each object was wonderful in itself, and at the same time revealed the secrets of the world." Disorganized, strange, and magical, the concept of the room of wonders contrasts notably with Ida Partenza's description of Mildred Bevel's chambers, yet aptly defines "Futures." The diary is full of people, things, actions that often are not what they seem nor act as they naturally or logically should, and it is within these pages of terse words, disconnected references, and blank spaces (Diaz describes the diary as "invested, both formally and

in its subject matter, in the avant-garde and high modernism” [“Writing”]) that we learn the truth of the genius behind the Bevels’ wealth. The clearest and most coherent narrative portions of the journal are devoted to Mildred’s “confession” that it was she, the “ventriloquist” to Andrew’s “dummy” (382), whose maneuvers provoked the 1929 stock market crash. We also learn that despite Andrew’s best efforts at creating a palatable Mildred in his autobiography, in real life it was Mildred who created Andrew, such that “the myth of Andrew grew until he became a god” (387). In a world where wealth is made precisely by divorcing money from things (but displayed and flaunted through the collection of things), Mildred is the true thing that keeps things moving.

In the first entry of the diary, recounting a morning experience with “Nurse” in the Swiss sanatorium, Nurse gives Mildred a rough massage and leaves her to rest face-down on the massage table, where “I try, and sometimes succeed, to become a thing” (363). The “thing” we are left with is the object—the daughter, the wife, the body, the plan—that has ceased to fulfill its intended function; Mildred’s subversion is her effort to be that thing

and her occasionally succeeding in being it. In the end, as Mildred drifts in and out of consciousness, she records “words peeling off from things” (402), detaching and resonating like the sounds peeling from the church bells that accompany her agony, like the blotting paper of inverted truths.

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