

Reread When Lewis Hyde's *The Gift* was originally published in 1983 the book was originally acclaimed as a powerful and timely antidote to the sell, sell, sell order of the day. Heidi Watts re-visits the book, which almost twenty years on from its re-publication has brought a new wave of admirers to its pages

In the giving

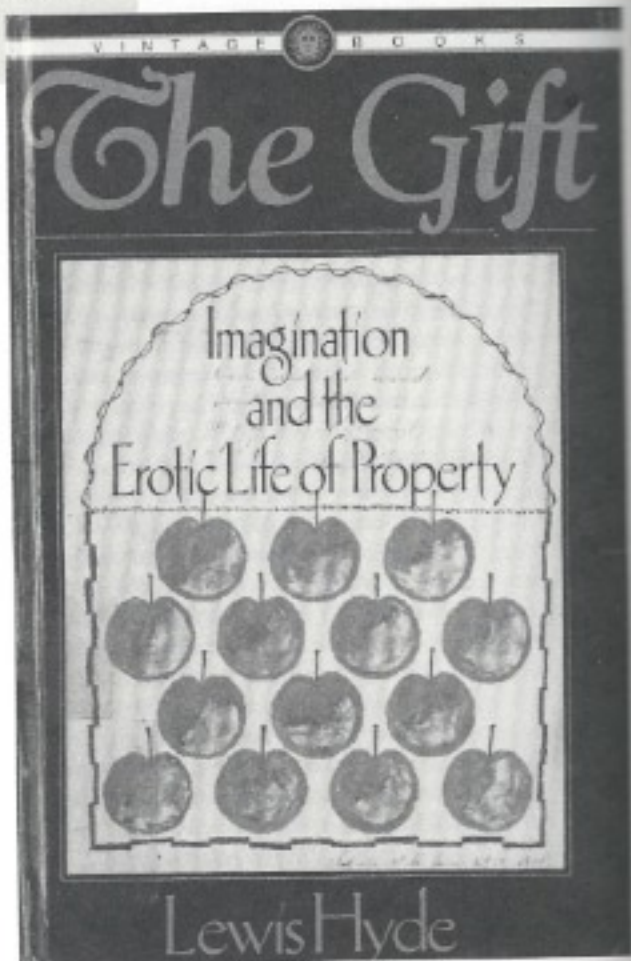
The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property, by Lewis Hyde. Originally published by Vintage Books, Random House, NY, 1983. Republished by Canongate, Edinburgh, 2007

...A gift that cannot be given away ceases to be a gift. The spirit of a gift is kept alive by its constant donation. (Hyde, 1983, pxiv)

What distinguishes a gift from a commodity is that the gift assumes a life of its own if the gift is a) given freely and without expectation of return, and b) has the capacity to be passed on. These later gifts are most likely to be gifts of learning, insight, or imagination. Into this category I include random acts of kindness and spontaneous generosity; gifts given anonymously or with no expectation of return; service; some forms of teaching; most forms of art and creative endeavour; and wisdom passed on in the form of stories, mentoring, books, films and welcome advice.

In this book, which has contributed significantly to my conception of 'gift', Lewis Hyde presents many examples of gift giving in other cultures, or at other times, and he casts an analytical eye on common forms of gift giving, many of which are not true gifting by the definition above, but actually forms of commodity exchange. In our own commercialized (Hyde would say commodified) culture we take this specious giving for granted. Among examples of language and practice in our culture Hyde explores the traditions and assumptions behind such terms as, 'I give this woman to this man', 'I will give you a loan (at 20% interest)'... 'They gave us a gift last year so we have to get one for them this year', and the hawking pleas of the advertiser, 'Give her a diamond this year...'

A fine piece of music, a good book, a scientific discovery, or the story your grandmother told you years ago and you have often retold; these are gifts which move. They have a life of their own, beyond that of the maker; some will endure for generations. In this sense, a scholarship, or an act of service which empowers



someone else is a gift which moves, and any gift which moves may come full circle back, not in a tit for tat, reciprocal exchange, but in a new form. Indeed the original gift may not even be recognizable when it returns if it is in the form of renewed trust, or enlarged community.

'...unlike the sale of a commodity, the giving of a gift tends to establish a relationship between the parties involved. Furthermore, when gifts circulate within a group, their commerce leaves a series of interconnected relationships in its wake, and a kind of decentralized cohesiveness emerges. The gift must always move.' (Hyde, 1983, p4)

At Antioch University New England I help students in an Environmental studies Ph.D. program formulate their service projects using the metaphor of gift as Hyde develops it. Service learning, we say, is a form of giving which does not anticipate immediate rewards, whether in money or in status. The service is voluntarily offered to a group or person who may then pass it on in the form of a newly earned skill, knowledge or