

The Language of the Gift in Intimate Relationships: Economics, Alienation, and Generative Justice

*On the Gift as Love's Language, the Ledger It Is Read Into,
and the Conditions under Which the Reading Becomes Alienation*

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*To the woman I love most deeply,
my “forest girl”:
to have met her is the finest gift ever given me,
and the whole of my life is the gift I return.*

投我以木桃，报之以琼瑶。
匪报也，永以为好也。

*You threw me a quince; I return a fine jade.
Not as repayment—but that our bond may last forever.*
from the 诗经·卫风·木瓜 (Book of Songs, “Quince”)

太上贵德，其次务施报。礼尚往来。

*The highest age prized virtue itself; the next attended to giving and requiting.
Ritual values reciprocity.*
from the 礼记·曲礼 (Book of Rites)

Abstract

The gift is the native language of love: an expressive act whose meaning is constituted by the relation it enacts. Economics possesses a rich literature on gift-giving—altruism in the family, gift exchange in labor markets, gifts as costly signals, the deadweight loss of in-kind transfer, and the crowding-out of intrinsic motivation—yet each of these theories, I argue, shares a common move: the gift is made tractable by *interpreting* it into a transfer language whose semantics is a ledger. This paper makes that move itself the object of analysis. A semiotic and psychoanalytic layer first explains the gift’s surplus over the thing: following Saussure and Baudrillard, the gift is a signifier whose value is positional—generated by its place in a differential system that is the relation’s own history— and following Lacan, what it signifies is desire rather than need, so that its functional excess (the economist’s “deadweight loss”) is the mechanism of its signifying work, not waste. Using elementary tools from formal language theory, I then model the expressive practice of intimate giving as a context-sensitive language whose semantics depends on relational history, and the economic-institutional reading as a non-injective, context-forgetting interpretation map into a finite-state ledger language. *Alienation* is then given a precise structural characterization: it is the contraction of generative practice onto the preimage of the ledger language—agents come to produce only what the interpretation can see. Two further harms follow: *epistemic injustice* [Fricker, 2007], since contributions outside the map’s range are illegible as contributions; and *distributive misdescription*, since ledger balance is the wrong functional for value that circulates generatively. Building on Eglash’s generative justice and a relational ontology of the gift, I propose recirculation depth, rather than bilateral balance, as the appropriate justice functional, and draw implications for the evidence-informed use of intimate-relationship data.

Keywords gift; economics of gift-giving; semiotics; sign-value; signifier; desire; psychoanalysis; formal language theory; interpretation; alienation; crowding out; relational work; epistemic injustice; generative justice; recirculation; social reproduction; intimate-relationship data.

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1. Introduction

Within intimate relationships, gifts are utterances before they are transfers. A gift says something—attention, recognition, commitment—whose content is not carried by the object but by the act-in-relation. Yet whenever giving must be made legible to institutions, or simply auditable to the partners’ own retrospective accounting, it is read through a different system: a language of transfers, valuations, and balances. The thesis of this paper is that the resulting harm, which I call the *alienation of the gift*, is best understood not as a vague cultural lament but as a structural property of the *interpretation* between two formal systems of unequal expressive power—and that this analysis unifies three literatures that rarely meet: the economics of gift-giving, the epistemology of injustice, and the theory of generative justice.

This paper is the fourth in a series on the philosophy of intimacy and the theory of justice. Paper III [Huang, 2026] analyzed the unilateral *vow* as the institution of a rights-order and located its injustice in the monopolization of second-order constituent power; the present paper turns from the legislation of a shared life to its *circulation*—from the law of love to the language of love—and finds a structurally parallel diagnosis: just as a vow can institute domination while remaining sincere, an accounting of gifts can institute alienation while remaining accurate.

The argument proceeds in four steps.

- (i) Section 2 reviews the principal economic theories of the gift and identifies their shared formal move: tractability is purchased by interpreting expressive acts into a transfer calculus.
- (ii) Section 3 opens the black box of expressive content. Drawing on structural semiotics and psychoanalysis, it locates the gift’s surplus over the thing in *sign-value*—value generated by the gift’s position in a differential system that is the relation’s own history—and identifies what the gift signifies: desire rather than need, so that the gift’s functional excess (the economist’s “deadweight loss”) is constitutive rather than wasteful.
- (iii) Section 4 formalizes the move with formal-language tools: an expressive language $\mathcal{L}_E$ with context-dependent semantics, a ledger language $\mathcal{L}_X$ with balance semantics, and a context-forgetting interpretation map $h : \mathcal{L}_E \rightarrow \mathcal{L}_X$. Alienation is characterized as the contraction of practice onto $h^{-1}(\mathcal{L}_X)$ under legibility pressure.
- (iv) Section 5 shows that the kernel of h —the expressive distinctions the map collapses—is exactly where Fricker [2007]’s testimonial and hermeneutical injustices arise in the intimate sphere.
- (v) Sections 6–7 replace the balance functional with a generative one (recirculation within the value-creating relation, after Eglash, 2016) and draw design implications for relational data systems.

2. Economic theories of the gift

The economics of the gift is not a blind spot but a developed field. The point of this section is not that economists ignore gifts; it is that each theory renders the gift tractable through a characteristic *reduction*, and that the reductions, though different in content, are identical in form.

2.1 Altruism and the family: the gift as interdependent utility

Becker [1981] models intra-family transfers through interdependent utility: the giver’s utility takes the recipient’s consumption or utility as an argument, so a gift is an allocation chosen by a (possibly altruistic) head maximizing a household objective. The Rotten Kid theorem and its descendants show how transfers discipline behavior inside the family. The reduction: the gift’s content is exhausted by its effect on the *allocation*; the act of giving has no semantic remainder beyond the resources moved and the preferences revealed.

2.2 Gift exchange: the gift as implicit contract

Akerlof [1982] famously reads above-market wages and above-minimum effort as a *partial gift exchange* between firm and worker: each side gives more than required, sustained by norms of reciprocity. Subsequent experimental work [Fehr et al., 1993] confirmed reciprocity as a robust behavioral force. The reduction: the gift is one leg of a deferred bilateral exchange; its meaning is its position in a reciprocity schedule. What makes gift exchange “work” is precisely that the gift creates an obligation—which is to say, an entry in an implicit ledger.

2.3 Signaling: the gift as costly information transmission

Camerer [1988] models gifts as economic signals of the giver’s type or of commitment to the relationship: inefficient, hard-to-resell gifts are *good* signals exactly because they are costly and relationship-specific. Prendergast and Stole [2001] develop the non-monetary character of gifts as an information problem: cash would be efficient but uninformative about how well the giver knows the recipient. The reduction: expressive content survives, but only as *information about a hidden parameter*—the gift means something solely insofar as it separates types in equilibrium.

2.4 Efficiency: the deadweight loss of giving

Waldfogel [1993] estimates that in-kind gifts destroy between a tenth and a third of their purchase value, since recipients value the goods below cost—the “deadweight loss of Christmas.” The reduction is here at its purest: the gift is evaluated as a resource transfer and found wanting, the expressive remainder appearing, if at all, as an unmodeled “sentimental value” residual. Section 3.2 will return to this finding and invert it.

2.5 Crowding out: the gift destroyed by the price

A fourth strand shows what happens when the two registers collide. Titmuss [1970] argued that paying for blood donation degrades both the supply and the meaning of the donated blood; Gneezy and Rustichini [2000] showed that introducing a fine for late pickup at daycare *increased* lateness, because the fine re-coded a moral relation as a priced service; and Bénabou and Tirole [2006] provide the canonical model in which extrinsic incentives crowd out intrinsic and reputational motivation. This literature is the closest economics comes to the present thesis: it demonstrates empirically that *re-description in the transfer language changes the practice described*. But it lacks a general account of why; Section 4 supplies one.

2.6 Relational earmarking: the boundary case

Finally, economic sociology—especially Zelizer [2005]—documents how intimates actively *mark* money and goods to keep relational meanings distinct: allowances, treats, support payments are differentiated precisely to prevent the collapse of relation into transaction. Zelizer’s “relational work” can be read, in the terms of this paper, as agents’ defensive maintenance of an expressive grammar against an encroaching interpretation map.

2.7 The shared move

Across these theories, the gift becomes tractable when its content is re-expressed in a language of transfers: an allocation (§2.1), a ledger entry in a reciprocity schedule (§2.2), a signal about a parameter (§2.3), a resource flow with a welfare loss (§2.4), a priced incentive (§2.5). Each reduction is legitimate for its purpose, and several are empirically powerful. The claim defended below is not that the reductions are false but that they are *interpretations*: structure-forgetting maps from a richer system into a poorer one—and that when the interpretation becomes the operative description inside the relationship itself, the forgetting becomes a harm.

3. The semiotics of the gift: the surplus over the thing

Section 2.7 concluded that the economic theories are interpretations—structure-forgetting maps from a richer system into a poorer one. Before formalizing the map (Section 4), we must say what, positively, the richer system contains: *where* the gift’s value-beyond-the-thing comes from, and *what* the gift signifies. Two traditions answer, and their answers slot precisely into the gap the economic theories leave open.

3.1 Sign-value: the gift as a position in a system of differences

Saussure’s two founding theses are the arbitrariness of the sign—the link between signifier and signified is fixed by the system, not by nature—and the differential theory of value: the value of a term is purely positional, constituted by its relations of difference to the other terms of the system [de Saussure, 1959]. Transposed to the gift: a gift signifies not by the intrinsic properties of the object but by its position in a relational code—*these* flowers rather than those, flowers rather than jewelry, a gift rather than none, on this day rather than another, from this giver

after that history. Baudrillard [1981] drew the economic consequence: beyond use-value and exchange-value there is *sign-value*, the worth an object bears as a marker of position in a code; and distinct from all three there is *symbolic exchange*, the register of the gift proper, in which the object is not autonomous but inseparable from the concrete relation of giver and receiver and from the moment of its giving. The “more than the thing” that the gift carries is therefore neither sentimental residue nor measurement error. It is value of a different kind, generated by the gift’s place in a differential system—and the system in question is nothing other than the history of the relation itself.

3.2 The signified is desire: the psychoanalytic deepening

If the gift is a signifier, what does it signify? Lacan’s triad of need, demand, and desire supplies the answer [Lacan, 2006]. A *need* can be satisfied by an object. A *demand*, because it is addressed to another, is always also a demand for love—for the other’s desire—over and above whatever object it asks for. *Desire* is the remainder when need is subtracted from demand, and no object satisfies it. The gift addresses itself to this remainder: what it gives is not, finally, the object but the giving—the attestation that the giver’s desire is engaged with this particular other. Hence Lacan’s formula that love is giving *what one does not have*: the true gift transmits something the giver does not possess as a good among goods—their lack, their desire—and no inventory of transferred objects can contain it.

Two consequences follow. The first is the *constitutive excess*. If the gift’s work is to signify desire rather than to satisfy need, then a degree of functional uselessness is not a defect of the gift but its signifying mechanism: a gift wholly absorbed by need—cash, the exact item on the list—risks signifying nothing beyond the need it meets. This inverts the efficiency finding of §2.4. Waldfogel’s deadweight loss, the measured gap between the cost of the gift and the recipient’s use-valuation of it, is, on the semiotic reading, in part the *footprint of sign-value*: the portion of the act that was never addressed to use in the first place, and that was doing the signifying. To keep the claim honest: not all measured loss is sign-value—mismatch and giver ignorance are real, and the signaling literature (§2.3) captures the informational part—but a nonzero excess is constitutive, so that a gift regime engineered to zero loss would be one in which the gift had ceased to signify.

The second is the *metonymic presence of the giver*. Mauss’s informants said the gift carries the *hau*, the spirit of the giver [Mauss, 1990]. In semiotic terms the gift is a metonym: contiguous with the giver, a detached part standing for the person. This is why the destruction or careless regifting of a gift wounds in a way that no equivalent-value substitution explains, and why the gift-object resists fungibility: its *identity*, not its value, does the work.

3.3 What a ledger can record: referent without signifier

A ledger records referents: which object moved, between whom, at what imputed value. The signifier’s position in the differential system—everything established in §3.1–3.2—is not a property of the object and is not recordable record-by-record. Baudrillard’s thesis that polit-

ical economy is *founded* on the reduction of symbolic exchange to economic exchange [Baudrillard, 1981] is, in the terms of this paper, the historical-scale version of the claim the next section defends formally: the accounting interpretation flattens the signifier into its referent and sign-value into exchange-value. What the formalization adds is the demonstration that the flattening is *architectural*—located in the per-symbol form of the interpretation map—and therefore cannot be repaired by more generous imputation.

4. A formal-linguistic account of alienation

This section makes the “shared move” of Section 2.7 precise using elementary formal language theory. The formalism is deliberately minimal; its purpose is to locate *where* in the interpretive pipeline the alienation occurs, not to claim that intimate life is literally a formal language. (Remark 1 states the scope limits explicitly.)

4.1 The expressive language

Definition 1 (Expressive practice). *Let Σ_E be an alphabet of expressive act types (giving an object, performing care, withholding, anticipating a need, marking an occasion, ...). An intimate relationship determines a set of well-formed histories $\mathcal{L}_E \subseteq \Sigma_E^*$ together with a meaning function*

$$\mu : \mathcal{L}_E \longrightarrow M,$$

where M is a space of relational meanings, and μ is history-dependent: in general the meaning of a history wa (the history w extended by act a) is not determined by the meaning of a taken alone, i.e. μ does not factor through a per-symbol valuation $\nu : \Sigma_E \rightarrow M$ with $\mu(a_1 \cdots a_n) = \bigoplus_i \nu(a_i)$ for any associative $\oplus$.

The non-factorization clause is the formal content of the everyday observation that the *same* act—a bouquet, a silence, a repayment— means different things depending on what came before, on what was foregone, on anniversaries and apologies and inside references. Meaning in $\mathcal{L}_E$ exhibits *long-distance dependencies*: an act may take its sense from an event arbitrarily far back in the history. In grammar-theoretic terms, any generative description of $(\mathcal{L}_E, \mu)$ adequate to such dependencies must exceed the finite-state, and in general the context-free, level: the semantics is context-sensitive in the strict sense that the contribution of a symbol depends on its (unboundedly distant) context.¹ Section 3 supplied this clause’s ground: the value of the gift-signifier is positional (§3.1), and position in a system is precisely what no per-symbol valuation ν can carry.

¹The point is the semantic analogue of the classical expressiveness arguments from cross-serial dependencies in natural language [Shieber, 1985]. Nothing below depends on the exact rung of the hierarchy, only on the strict inclusion: ledger semantics is per-symbol compositional in a way relational semantics is not.

4.2 The ledger language

Definition 2 (Ledger). Let $\Sigma_X = \{(i \rightarrow j, v) : i, j \in N, v \in \mathbb{R}_{\geq 0}\}$ be an alphabet of **transfer records** over a set of parties N , and let $\mathcal{L}_X = \Sigma_X^*$ with the **balance semantics**

$$\beta : \mathcal{L}_X \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^N, \quad \beta(x)_k = \sum_{(i \rightarrow k, v) \in x} v - \sum_{(k \rightarrow j, v) \in x} v.$$

Two properties of β matter. It is **per-symbol compositional** (each record contributes independently; order is irrelevant up to the running balance), hence recognizable by finite means—this is what makes ledgers auditable. And it is **total**: every string of records has a balance. The ledger never says “meaningless”; it always returns a number.

4.3 The interpretation map and its kernel

Definition 3 (Accounting interpretation). An **accounting interpretation** is a monoid homomorphism $h : \Sigma_E^* \rightarrow \Sigma_X^*$ induced by a per-symbol assignment $h : \Sigma_E \rightarrow \Sigma_X \cup \{\varepsilon\}$: each expressive act type is mapped to a transfer record (its “imputed value”) or erased.

Every theory in Section 2 implements some h : Becker’s allocations, Akerlof’s implicit reciprocity entries, Camerer’s signal costs, Waldfogel’s purchase prices. Three structural facts about any such h do the philosophical work:

- (a) **Context-forgetting**. Because h is per-symbol, it cannot be sensitive to history: $h(wa) = h(w)h(a)$. Whatever part of μ depends on long-distance context is invisible to $\beta \circ h$ **by construction**, not by accident of calibration. No re-weighting of imputed values repairs this, since the failure is architectural (Definition 1’s non-factorization clause).
- (b) **Non-injectivity with structured kernel**. Distinct histories $w \neq w'$ with $h(w) = h(w')$ abound, and the collapsed distinctions are precisely the expressive ones: an act of care and a strategic appeasement of equal imputed value are identified. Write $\ker h = \{(w, w') : h(w) = h(w')\}$; the harm analyzed below lives in $\ker h$.
- (c) **Erasure**. Acts assigned ε —typically sustained, unpriceable, anticipatory care—do not merely lose nuance; they vanish from the record altogether. Erasure is the limiting case of (b) and the formal hook for Section 5.

4.4 Alienation as contraction onto the preimage

So far, h is only a description, and a lossy description harms no one. The harm begins when the description acquires **normative force**: when institutions (courts, tax authorities, platforms) and eventually the partners themselves audit the relationship through $\beta \circ h$. Call this **legibility pressure**: histories are rewarded, defended, or even merely **rememberable** to the extent that their images under h are well-formed and balanced.

Definition 4 (Alienation). Let G be the generative process by which partners produce expressive

histories (their practice). **Alienation** is the dynamic contraction of G under legibility pressure: the practiced language $L(G) \subseteq \mathcal{L}_E$ converges toward a sublanguage on which μ factors through h —i.e. the partners come to produce only meanings that survive the interpretation, so that, in the limit, $(L(G), \mu)$ is isomorphic to a fragment of $(\mathcal{L}_X, \beta)$.

Proposition 1 (Informal). *Under legibility pressure, the fixed point of the practice dynamics is a ledger: expressive capacity strictly greater than finite-state is not merely unrecorded but unexercised.*

This is the precise sense in which “love’s language is re-coded as transaction.” The crowding-out findings of §2.5 are the empirical signature of the contraction: **Gneezy and Rustichini’s** parents did not misunderstand the fine; their practice re-formed around the language the fine made operative. Alienation, so characterized, is not commodification (an object entering market circulation) but a **grammar replacement**: the generative system of the relation is substituted by the image system of its own accounting. And Zelizer’s relational earmarking (§2.6) is its countermeasure: the deliberate maintenance of distinctions that h would collapse—in our terms, agents acting to keep $\ker h$ semantically alive.

Remark 1 (Scope). *The formalism claims (i) that ledger semantics is per-symbol compositional while relational semantics is not, and (ii) that this gap, combined with legibility pressure, predicts contraction of practice. It does not claim that Σ_E , μ , or G are empirically identifiable objects, nor that a unique h exists. The model is an explanatory skeleton—a statement of **which structural features** produce the alienation—and should be held to that standard, no more.*

5. Epistemic injustice: the kernel made flesh

Fricker [2007] distinguishes **testimonial** injustice (a deflated credibility judgment owing to prejudice) from **hermeneutical** injustice (a structural gap in shared interpretive resources that leaves some experiences unintelligible even to those who undergo them). The formal apparatus of Section 4 locates both.

Testimonial injustice as erasure. A partner asserts that sustained anticipatory care *is* a contribution. Under an operative interpretation h that assigns such acts ε (§3(c)), the assertion has no truth-maker in the record: there is literally nothing in $\beta \circ h$ for the claim to be **about**. The credibility deficit then attaches not to the speaker’s sincerity but to the ontological standing of the asserted category. Empirically, this is the familiar pattern in which unpaid affective and household labor—disproportionately performed by women—is discounted in both private negotiation and legal settlement [Folbre, 2001].

Hermeneutical injustice as kernel-blindness. More deeply: if the community’s shared interpretive resources just *are* the operative h (because the exchange grammar is the institutionally supported one), then distinctions in $\ker h$ are not merely unrecorded but **unnameable**. The giver experiences a difference—between care and appeasement, between a gift and a payment—for which the available vocabulary has one word. This is hermeneutical injustice in the intimate sphere, and it is mechanically coupled to alienation: the same context-forgetting map that con-

tracts practice (§4.4) also impoverishes the concepts available for contesting the contraction. The injustice is self-sealing.

6. From balance to recirculation: generative justice

6.1 Eglash’s generative justice

Distributive justice asks how an already-produced surplus should be divided; Eglash [2016] asks instead whether value is allowed to *circulate back to, and remain within, the network of relations that generated it*, rather than being extracted from it. Eglash’s examples—from commons-based production to indigenous and DIY economies—share a topology: value flows in *cycles of recursive depth*, re-entering and compounding within the generating loop, instead of exiting along an extraction path.²

6.2 The relation as the generative unit

On a relational ontology, the unit of analysis in intimate giving is not the individual party but the relation as a value-generating system: gifts are moments in the relation’s self-production, not transfers between pre-formed endpoints. This re-founds the justice question. The ledger functional β evaluates *node balance*—did each party’s inflows match outflows?—which presupposes exactly the per-symbol transfer reading whose inadequacy Section 4 established. The generative alternative evaluates whether what the relation produces (material, affective, *and recognitional* value) recirculates.

Definition 5 (Recirculation depth; sketch). *Model a relation as a directed multigraph whose nodes include the parties and the relation-level stock itself, with value-flow edges labeled by type (material, affective, recognitional). For a flow history F , let $R(F)$ be the proportion of generated value that lies on cycles returning to the generating subgraph within the history, weighted by cycle depth (number of re-entries). Generative justice in the intimate sphere is the requirement that R be sustained across value types—in particular, that recognitional flows not be systematically acyclic (recognition flowing out of, but never back to, a contributor).*

Remark 2. *R deliberately treats recognition as a first-class flow rather than a residual. This is the formal repair of Section 5: an act erased by h (ε -mapped) cannot enter β , but it can enter R , because R ’s edge set is defined over the expressive practice, not over its accounting image. A full treatment—axioms for R , its relation to network-flow and to Eglash’s recursive depth, and estimable proxies—is deferred to a companion paper.*

²Paper III of this series [Huang, 2026] arrived at a cognate notion from the normative side: generative justice as the maintenance of the conditions under which each party’s ongoing self-formation in the relation remains open and uncaptured. The two senses converge in the present framework: the recirculation of relational value (Eglash’s sense) is the material condition of ongoing co-formation (Paper III’s sense), and the standing to contest the terms is what keeps the recirculation from being unilaterally redirected.

6.3 What the reframing dissolves

The three harms now align as three faces of one error—applying β where R is the appropriate functional: expressive alienation is the contraction of practice onto β 's domain (§4.4); epistemic injustice is the unnameability of $\ker h$ (§5); distributive misdescription is the evaluation of a cyclic generative system by an acyclic balance metric.

7. Implications: relational data and evidence-informed decisions

The analysis bears directly on the utilization of intimate-relationship data and on evidence-informed decision-making about relationships—an agenda this author pursues in parallel empirical work.

Instrumentation imports a grammar. To measure is, by default, to implement an h : a relational data system that counts gifts, chores, or messages as balanced inputs operationalizes the ledger and thereby *accelerates* the contraction of §4.4—a relational instance of Goodhart's law. The crowding-out literature (§2.5) predicts, and Definition 4 explains, that such systems do not neutrally record the practice; they re-form it.

Designing for the generative grammar. The constructive program is to encode R rather than β : (i) treat recognition as a logged, first-class flow, so that erased contributions acquire truth-makers (repairing the testimonial deficit); (ii) supply shared vocabulary for affective labor, expanding the hermeneutical resources beyond the operative h ; (iii) evaluate the relationship by recirculation indicators (are contributions of every type eventually re-entered, acknowledged, reciprocated-in-kind-or-otherwise within the cycle?) rather than by balance; (iv) preserve, in the data model itself, the context-dependence of meaning— e.g. event records that link to history rather than free-standing valued entries. Whether intimate-relationship data systems help or harm is therefore not a question about data per se, but about *which grammar the system makes operative*.

8. Conclusion

Economics has not ignored the gift; it has interpreted it—as allocation, implicit contract, signal, inefficient transfer, or priced incentive—and each interpretation is a context-forgetting homomorphism into a ledger language of strictly weaker expressive power. The semiotic and psychoanalytic analysis identified what the interpretation loses—the positional value of the signifier and the desire it attests—and the formal analysis showed the loss to be architectural. Alienation is what happens when the interpretation acquires normative force and practice contracts onto its preimage; epistemic injustice is the unnameability of the distinctions the map collapses; and distributive misdescription is the use of a balance functional on a generative cycle. The repair is not to abandon formalization but to formalize the *right* object: the recirculation of generated value—material, affective, recognitional—within the relation that produces it.

Read alongside Paper III, the series' two diagnoses are one structure seen from two sides. There, a law of love legislated unilaterally institutes domination even when sincere; here, a language

of love interpreted unilaterally institutes alienation even when accurate. In both, the remedy is not purer intention but shared authority over the terms—there, the co-authorship of the vow; here, the keeping-alive of the expressive grammar in which the gift can still say what it means. Future work will axiomatize the recirculation functional, connect it rigorously to Eglash’s recursive depth, and test the design program of Section 7 against field data from a deployed relational infrastructure.

Acknowledgements

This paper is the fourth in a series on the philosophy of intimacy and the theory of justice. I thank Ron Eglash for correspondence on generative justice and recursive depth, on which Section 6 builds.

This series, and this paper above all, are dedicated to the one I love most deeply—the “forest girl” to whom the first paper of the series was already devoted. We were born of the same hometown, yet it was in Japan that we met. To have met her is the finest gift the universe has ever given me; and what I give in return is the whole of my life itself, offered as a gift. It is from her, and not from any theory, that the thesis of this paper was first learned.

In the interest of transparency, I note that an AI assistant was used in preparing this manuscript, as a tool for drafting, structuring, and refining the argument and its prose; the ideas, commitments, and final judgements are my own, and I take full responsibility for the content.

愿天下有情人，赠不为偿，受不为债，情意长流而不竭。

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