

have you alternately laughing and cheering.

*Nobody's Mother* is not an anthology by women who hate kids. It is not an anthology by women who regret not having had children. It is a complex and varied collection that explores multiple ways to parent, and relationships between women and their mothers, women and their partners, and women and themselves. It addresses abortion, adoption, step-parenting, caretaking, travel, abuse, work, love, and writing. *Nobody's Mother* would be an excellent text for use in university courses on mothering, women and popular culture, intro to women's studies, Canadian literature, and creative non-fiction. It is also a book to pass on to women and men we know and work with outside the university, since it creates an opening for respectful discourse where little exists that is not sensationalized or condescending.

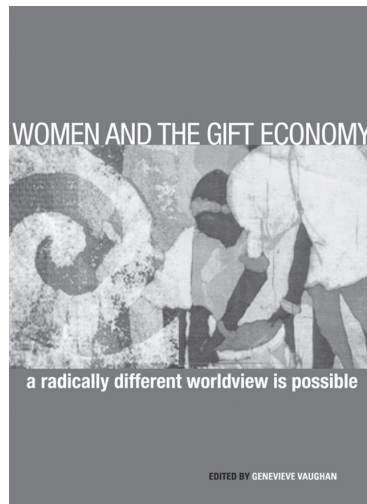
*Beth Pentney is a Ph.D. student in Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University. Her research areas include makeover culture, feminist television studies, and online audience studies.*

## **WOMEN AND THE GIFT ECONOMY: A RADICALLY DIFFERENT WORLDVIEW IS POSSIBLE**

Genevieve Vaughan, Ed.  
Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education, Inc., 2007

### **REVIEWED BY JOANNA SWANGER**

The World Social Forum (WSF) has performed a vital function for people dedicated to economic restructuring toward social justice and sustainable peace: it has empowered them col-



lectively by introducing them to one another. Still, much of the discourse at the WSF also demonstrates that when people convene on the basis of a shared frustration with the global economy, they might use the opportunity primarily to create a space of comfort, which is accomplished in the WSF through the ritual refrain of such grievances as corporate irresponsibility, environmental devastation, and the long-known complicity of economic structures in exacerbating racism, classism, and sexism. To go no further than this, however, means an opportunity is lost, for the question of what is to be done must be answered through dialogue and collaboration grounded in critical analysis. The 33 contributors to this creative and analytically rich volume have answered the call to continue WSF-inspired discussions and collaborate in the necessary work of peace-building through cultural change toward economic transformation.

This collection resulted from a post-WSF conference in 2004 on the theme of transforming Patriarchal Capitalism via the gift economy. The authors argue the need for a paradigm shift to make solutions visible by recasting the nature of the problem. It is not a lack of individual morals or integrity on the part of certain actors—e.g., the agents of transnational lending institutions, corporations, and the investor class—that causes the aforementioned grievances. It is

the cultural logic of exchange, the systemic imperative of near-sole reliance upon the profit motive to mobilize resources. The logic of exchange attempts to harness self-interest in the service of the greater good, but it has failed to meet needs, in large measure because this is not what it is designed to do. The cultural logic of gift giving, however, takes as its fundamental objective meeting the needs of others. Genevieve Vaughan writes: “The gift interaction is transitive and ... [creates] a relation of inclusion between the giver and the receiver... Gift giving implies the value of the other while the exchange transaction ... is reflexive and implies the value only of oneself. Gift giving is qualitative rather than quantitative, other-oriented rather than ego-oriented, inclusive rather than exclusive.”

The emancipatory potential to be unleashed by and through the gift economy begins with quelling cynicism by making manifest the extant gift economy in operation, and this collection presents wonderful examples in this vein, such as Jeannette Armstrong's description of gifting among the Sylix people of Okanagan (British Columbia); Rabia Adelarim-Chikh's discussion of solidarity economics within women's banking networks in Senegal; and Yvette Abrahams' discussion of gifting among the Khoekhoe prior to European colonialism in South Africa and vestiges of gifting that remain. This volume also contributes to liberation by excelling at highlighting the efforts of two vast groups of people who have historically been underrepresented—or ignored altogether—by prominent leftist critiques: Indigenous peoples and women. Both Jeannette Armstrong and Mililani Trask argue that what most unites Indigenous cultures in contradistinction to the culture of patriarchal capitalism is precisely reciprocity, both sociocultural and ecological. Thus, Indigenous cultures are the vanguard of workable economic structures, which, the authors

argue, will achieve their greatest viability at local and regional levels. So too do women have something unique to contribute to the process of emancipation more generally. First, many of the authors discuss the matriarchal principle as the organizing principle for the gift economy. Heidi Goettner-Abendroth writes, “The principle of motherliness is the opposite [from those that underlie the logic of exchange], where altruism reigns and the well-being of all is at the centre.” Second, Linda Christiansen-Ruffman proffers a treatment of the different economic calculus (distinct from that attributed to *Homo economicus*) women routinely practice and the redefinition of wealth that guides women’s choices, a redefinition distinguished by its collective and relational orientation. The authors do not have much patience for the criticism of essentialism, for it is a fundamental pragmatism that drives their search for ways of organizing economies that work; the charge of essentialism, while sound at times, can also be an obstacle to transformation. Actually, the authors are careful to illustrate that giving is a human attribute (of *Homo donans*), not one unique to women. Semiotician Susan Petrilli contributes a marvelous discussion of gifting in the arts of language and rhetoric. Vaughan adds, “Looking at language as transposed gift giving . . . confirms the pan-human character of gift giving . . .”

A critical tension runs throughout the book, as the authors portray the complexity of the relationship between the (parasitic) patriarchal capitalist economy, and the (host) gift economy, which sustains the former, filling in to meet needs unmet by the former. Vaughan writes, “[T]he gift economy, consistent with its principle, gives to the exchange economy . . . giving it value [by means of exploitation, which is viewed as the capture of free gifts—e.g., surplus labor, remittances sent by migrants] and thereby colluding with its own oppression.”

Continuing with the theme of potential parasitic destruction of the host, Peggy Antrobus writes, “If we do not recognize and affirm the gift economy, it will die.” On the other hand, many authors illustrate precisely the resilience of the gift economy. Antrobus herself describes how Hurricane Ivan devastated Grenada but left in its wake a functioning gift economy, which was indeed the only way people could mobilize resources under the circumstances. Furthermore, Vaughan writes that in spite of their seeming ubiquity and omnipotence, the normative structures of the logic of exchange are “actually rather fragile and therefore [need] to be protected from the possible alternatives.” Claudia Von Werlhof adds another layer of complexity by arguing that it is the damage sustained by the gift economy and its most consistent practitioners that is “one of the main reasons for the depth of the crisis of . . . contemporary civilization.”

So, which is the more fragile system, and which the more resilient? This critical tension is resolved in part by Paola Melchiori’s article, which recognizes the paradox and draws a distinction between the free gift economy and the forced gift economy. Melchiori writes of the collapse of the Argentine economy in 2001:

The crisis was terrible, people were starving, but another economy was being discovered and used, awakening an enormous energy among people, developing what I would call a “healthy crisis” of the social imaginary. Other ways to survive, other social fabrics, became visible and imaginable.

When the dominant logic is in place, the (forced) gift economy is indeed strained, often to the breaking point; but when the dominant logic of exchange suddenly fails on a massive scale, the (free) gift economy is renewed and flourishes.

The astute reader of this collection will see that it is the logic of the gift that is the more resilient because while the logic of exchange utilizes one narrow aspect of the complex human character—self-interest—and does so quite often to bad effect, the gift economy harnesses a much wider range of human capabilities that arise naturally from the parental response to children’s vulnerability and from ecological dictates. The insistence upon strict adherence to the logic of exchange—based on self-interest and a narrow concept of freedom enshrined in the market—has brought us the myriad vexations of the current global economy. The praxis of the gift economy responds with the beauty of cultural diversity. Corinne Kumar writes,

What we need in the world today are new universalisms . . . universalisms *that recognize the universal in the specific civilizational idioms in the world. . . .* Universalisms that will respect the plurality of the different societies, of their philosophy, of their ideology, their traditions and cultures; one that will be rooted in the particular, in the *vernacular*, one which will find a resonance in the different civilizations, *birthing new cosmologies.*

Indeed, the authors of this volume are midwives in this critical process.

*Joanna Swanger is Director of the Peace and Global Studies Program at Earlham College. She is recently the co-author, with Howard Richards, of The Dilemmas of Social Democracies: Overcoming Obstacles to a More Just World (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006).*