



faculty profile

“How do our relationships with material objects define our gender relations, our kinship, the ways we think about ourselves?”

# in the material world

*Beth Notar, Associate Professor of Anthropology*

*by Jim H. Smith · Photo by Nick Lacy*

“I ask my students to think about why we value what we value. What is money really about?”

In the 1920s, as Germany’s post-war economy was sucked into a vortex of hyper-inflation, a rubber-faced comedian and social critic named Karl Valentin offered a wry artistic commentary. He glued worthless 100,000 Deutschmark notes to a park bench, actually enhancing their value and creating, in the bargain, one of the small totems that marked the shifting borders of Dada, the early 20th-century art movement.

Language, and its layers of meanings, sparked Valentin’s imagination. He called his creation “Deutsche Bank.” It was a not very subtle double entendre, since the word “bank” means both a financial institution and a bench in German.

Professor Beth Notar likes to tell that story in “The Meanings of Money,” one of the anthropology courses she teaches at Trinity. “In my work, I have always found that it helps me to focus on particular cultural symbols and objects and then tease out the aspects of those things and our perceptions of them that tell us how they affect society.”

Notar says. “How do our relationships with material objects define our gender relations, our kinship, the ways we think about ourselves?”

If scrutiny of such objects can, indeed, provide insight into the truest heart of a society, then Notar probably couldn’t find a better artifact than money to compel her students to think critically about social constructs they may have taken for granted, unquestioningly, all of their young lives. Few people, after all, are unmoved by the notion of currency so devalued that a man could upholster a park bench with it.

“I ask my students to think about why we value what we value,” says Notar. “What is money really about? What makes it valuable? What is at the root of our perceptions? And who sets these standards?”

**“Each time I need new maps”**

Notar’s interest in society’s romance with money was born not in the United States, but in China, a nation where, at the same time Karl Valentin

was papering the park bench, literally thousands of different currencies were in circulation. The very idea of such cultural diversity has captivated Notar’s imagination ever since her adolescence in Madison, Wisconsin.

In high school she took a course that examined China comprehensively. “I was instantly hooked on this huge nation where a fifth of the world’s population resides,” she remembers. In the years since that formative educational experience, “I’ve become especially interested in the revolutionary changes that have taken place in China, practically every decade, since the mid-19th century,” she adds.

It is changing still. Noting that she has made eight trips to China, often staying from a month to several years, she says, “Each time I go I need new maps, even though only a couple of years may have passed.”

Notar first visited China in 1985, after earning a B.A. in Chinese studies at Wellesley College, of which Madame Chiang Kai-shek and the celebrated poet Bing Xin were alumnae.

She learned Mandarin there. Then, after spending six months honing her language skills at Beijing University, she traveled to Taiwan where she was employed for a year as a translator in the National Palace Museum.

Later in 1987, on a Johns Hopkins Scholarship, she enrolled in Nanjing University, taking classes in Chinese history and economics. That coincided with the 10th anniversary of China’s economic reform era, and it turned out to be a watershed experience for Notar.

“Change was evident everywhere—in fashion, politics, business,” she says. “It was a very exciting time. There were new magazines, private businesses, stores. People were talking more openly.”

It was in 1988 that she first ventured off what she thought was the proverbial “beaten path,” to visit Dali, a small village in southwest China’s Himalayan foothills.

She had read about Dali in a guidebook published by Lonely Planet, whose popular series of “alternative” travel guides target people who

## What makes it valuable? What is at the root of our perceptions? And who sets these standards?”

seek something more “authentic” than the typical tourist experience.

Like many of the other western tourists who joined her on that initial excursion, Notar expected to find a slice of the traditional rural Chinese life that, even then, was rapidly being displaced by the new economy. Instead, she stumbled upon a cultural nexus offering such compelling anthropological opportunities that she was transfigured.

### **Finding Dali with the “Lonely Planeteers”**

Dali has consumed much of her research time in the 19 years since that first visit. And it is the subject of her first book, *Displacing Desire: Travel and Popular Culture in China*, published last year by University of Hawai'i Press.

The word “displacing” in Notar’s title is an adjective. What she found in Dali was a remote place whose identity was swiftly changing to comport with the expectations and desires of foreign visitors, expectations shaped by a variety of media, including the Lonely Planet guide

and a movie musical and Hong Kong martial arts novels set in the western borderlands. Notar calls those visitors “lonely planeteers,” people like the woman she once met in Dali who called herself a “traveler” and employed the word “tourist” to disparage the others who were destroying the old China.

The fact is, few visitors to Dali find whatever they are looking for, Notar says. Whether they are travelers or tourists, however, their relentless quest transcends semantics. It has irrevocably transformed the once-quiet village along the old trade routes to Tibet from a tiny town with small guest houses to a rapidly growing city with a martial arts theme park called “Daliwood” and restaurants that cater to western tastes by serving spaghetti, teriyaki, and banana pancakes. And the “lonely planeteers” have become, themselves, part of the exhibit.

Galvanized by what she observed in China in 1988, Notar returned to the United States and enrolled in the University of Michigan, where, over the next decade, she completed

an M.A. in Chinese studies and master’s and doctorate degrees in anthropology. Along the way, she returned to China several times, living for extended periods of time with families in Dali and recording the mercurial face of life in the village.

For an anthropologist, she says, Dali has been an ideal microcosm, mirroring changes taking place all over China. “To provide the electricity, infrastructure, and services for national and transnational consumers, existing structures have been razed, and new dams, airports, railways, highways, hotels, condominiums, shopping plazas, golf courses, and amusement parks have been constructed in their place,” she wrote. “In this massive destruction and construction process, it is estimated that between 40 and 70 million Chinese farmers have been displaced in only ten years . . .”

When she returns from her current sabbatical, Notar will use *Displacing Desire* for the first time as a text at Trinity, where her classes are generally made up of a mix of students

from small towns and large metropolitan areas—both of whom experience some culture shock in Hartford—as well as what she calls “third-culture kids,” students who have lived all over the world during their formative years. The mix, she says, reflects Trinity’s expanding commitment to global education and it affords her ample opportunities to provoke the kinds of classroom dialogues in which narrowly defined paradigms about the world usually run aground on the rocks of diversity.

Even her book, or any book taken as an object, can challenge assumptions. One day in Dali, she recalls, she was taking photographs of villagers. She made a habit of giving the people copies of her photos as a way to say “thank you.” One older woman so cherished the modest gift that she wanted to preserve it by wrapping it up. She hurried into the small house where she lived and tore a page from one of her daughter’s textbooks. Like the bank notes with which Valentin papered the park bench, the paper itself had more value than the words printed on it.