6 *"I Never Looked into a Diamond"*

The Transparent Ignorance of the Diamond Broker

SAM SHUMAN

"You're an archaeologist," observed Shloimy, a Hasidic diamond broker with a graying beard and a Borsalino hat, as his eyes pierced me through his tortoiseshell-framed glasses.

"No," I instinctively corrected him, coiling the black, lavaliere microphone back into its case, after first turning my Zoom H5 hand recorder off. It was a common mistake, even in the United States. Archaeology just happened to be a different subfield.

"I'm an ANTHROPOLOGIST."

"No," the expression on his face told me, "you are the one confused." He knew the difference. "You're studying an extinct species," Shloimy declared, without a hint of irony. The diamond broker had already died out. I was just studying the aftermath. I had been led for the first time into the *Beurs Voor Diamanthandel*, one of the four trading halls of Antwerp's diamond industry. What I had misread for an interview was a guided tour of the ruins. This was an excavation site. The necks of the daylight UV lamps, affixed to the end of each long wooden table, all bent into darkness. Save an aging trader seated a few tables over, the trading hall lay empty.

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My entry into the trading hall happened so spontaneously, so unceremoniously. Our scheduled chat had started at Sam's, the adjacent kosher restaurant. But the restaurant had closed now, too. And suddenly, our scheduled chat had to be relocated. Diamond brokers, unlike traders, are peripatetic. Without an office, Shloimy had nowhere to host me. I certainly had nowhere to host him. So he asked the guard at the desk in front of the trading hall if I could be granted entry under his supervision. The guard agreed. The inner sanctum, which I had long peered through with a sense of wonder and curiosity, was now before me. But as I learned, no one had traded here in earnest for many years. If the space had actually been operational, Shloimy explained to me, the guard would have refused me entry. Diamonds worth millions of dollars once circulated through these halls.[1] My very ability to access it testified to its disuse. Antwerp's diamond trade had migrated from its home at Café Petit Duc on the neighboring Pelikaanstraat to this diamond bourse in 1904. Over 115 years later, whatever trade lingered took place in the offices on the floors above, in the virtual world of WhatsApp and Telegram groups, on secure online wholesale platforms like IDEX or RapNet, and on retail platforms such as Amazon and BlueNile. The trading halls had become a de facto club for old men in the industry – to sip coffee and tea, play an occasional game of backgammon, watch the news, or read the newspaper.[2]

We continued our chat. Shloimy nostalgically guided me through the space. There, he pointed to the side of the room, were the closed stalls

[1] Although the diamond industry in Belgium currently operates on American dollars, transactions throughout much of the twentieth century operated through its own currency, the "diamond guilder." Prior to 1936, Belgian diamond merchants typically traded in Dutch guilders, each one "equivalent to 20 Belgian francs, 1/12th £, or approximately $.40 in American money" (Kaplan 1954–1955: 123). In 1936, however, nearly all European currencies abandoned the gold standard. This created fluctuating exchange rates between the Dutch guilder and the Belgian franc. In response, Belgian diamond merchants created a standardized "diamond guilder," which maintained the exchange rate from the years of the gold standard (ibid.).

[2] The only time I did witness this trading hall in use was during an industry-wide "town hall" in July 2018. Chief executives from De Beers, the very corporation that in 1947 launched the iconic advertising campaign "A Diamond Is Forever," announced details about its latest venture: Lightbox, a line of synthetic, lab-grown diamond (LGD) jewelry. These executives explained that Lightbox jewelry was not intended to last forever. "An LGD is not 'forever,' but it's perfect for right now . . . one should not buy LGD for important moments in life" (Antwerp World Diamond Centre 2018).

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where brokers would be given the goods from the vault. As Shloimy recreated the scene, conjuring images from the storehouse of his memory, I felt transported back to a different time, as one might imagine in a flashback scene when the dust and detritus of accumulated time lifts into a past more alive than the present. Shloimy reminisced how the brokers would then line up with their goods as the traders sat at the table. No chair was uninhabited. "Each day there was sitting next to the window, there was sitting a customer. And the brokers used to sit in the line to show goods. My grandfather was involved in the diamond industry, he was also a broker," Shloimy told me. "But Antwerp is a small town. So everyone's involved." By "everyone," Shloimy meant nearly all of the Jewish men:

> Ninety percent of the people in that time, even more than 90 percent, 90 to 95 percent of the people went into diamonds. There wasn't much choice of doing other things. So, it was an easy work to get into. We see only now how spoiled we were. Then in the times – I'm talking about my coming into the business. It was in 1983, '84. We saw, now that we look back, we saw what a *gan eden*[3] we were in that time.

I had heard about the good old days of the diamond industry before. It was a favorite pastime of the men I met. To trade in the diamond bourse trading hall once required a suit and tie. Now, most of the Hasidic men in the Jewish community had to learn skills elsewhere in the types of jobs that make your clothes dirty, as plumbers, electricians, and tilers, whereas Hasidic women often work as homemakers, bookkeepers, secretaries, and teachers.

But then something utterly unexpected occurred. Shloimy made a startling confession. "Because the broker is not necessary to understand. I'm already a broker, I was a broker for thirty years, I don't understand yet a diamond. I never looked into a diamond. The opposite," he continued, as if unfurling an oral argument in the dialectical logic of a Talmudic passage, where one first begins with an initial assumption (*hava amina*) only to later disprove it in the conclusion (*maskana*). "The bosses used to be angry at the brokers who looked at the diamonds because they said they didn't want you to value their diamonds or something. You ask the price and you bring me a price.

[3] Lit. "Garden of Eden" or "paradise."

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It's none of your business if it's 'yes worth,' if it's 'not worth.' It's worth 10 percent more, 5 percent less."

Despite this brief, one-off encounter, his words stayed with me. They puzzled me. "I never looked into a diamond"? As I continued fieldwork to study the value of the human diamond broker at this protracted moment of his "vanishing,"[4] this claim continued to reappear. Over 4,000 miles away, in a Starbucks nestled within the fortressed Bandra Kurla Complex in Mumbai, a Gujarati Indian broker made a similar claim over a cup of coffee. He explained, much to my bewilderment, that he refuses to even open diamond parcels before brokering them. It was better to stay ignorant of the goods he brokered.

What does one do with such a claim? Were these brokers lying? Was this an act of redirection or subterfuge?[5] If this was a lie, however, it was a social lie – that is, something that circulated, that they told to others, and not just to themselves, that they collectively internalized and interiorized. A question stood before me: Taking ignorance as endowed with its own characteristics, "as much a social construct as

[4] In the particular case of the diamond industry, nearly all of the brokers I encountered were men (bar one woman, who refused to speak with me). The gendered language used throughout the article reflects the male homosociality of brokerage and of the diamond industry more broadly.

[5] Acts of deceit and dissimulation have storied histories within the annals of anthropology (Bailey 1991; Basso 1987). Lying is, of course, not the exclusive prerogative of the informant. Tricksters can be positioned on both sides of the ethnographic exchange and lies taken up by informants and ethnographers alike (Metcalf 2002). As observed in a provocative introduction to a volume on ignorance in anthropology, "anthropologists have often set out to defend the people they study – showing that far from being ignorant, they are actually very knowledgeable indeed" (Mair et al 2012). This recuperative epistemic thread runs from musings on witchcraft among the Azande (Evans-Pritchard 1937) to methadone addiction among heroin addicts (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009) to soda consumption in a country with rampant obesity (Roberts 2017) to an Islamic women's piety movement in Egypt (Mahmood 2011). It lays bare the logics, constrained by social structures and economic conditions, that drive the actions and strategies of people who would otherwise be branded as irrational and irresponsible or charged with false consciousness.

Showcasing the indigenous and local knowledge of informants has served as a necessary antidote to the claims of colonial science that represented colonized peoples as cognitively inferior, to justify the dispossession and rule over them. This impulse, however, has also obscured the ways in which ignorance shapes everyday interaction. Overplaying the knowledge of those we encounter in the field transforms our informants into omniscient deities.

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knowing" (Gershon and Raj 2000), why might claiming ignorance be productive or strategic (Gershon 2000; McGoey 2012)?

I use this play of knowledge/ignorance between traders and brokers in the diamond transaction not only to understand the situated case of brokerage in the diamond industry, but also to challenge dominant frameworks for understanding the future of work and the cutting out of the middleman (or "disintermediation") in supply chains (or "ignorance chains"[6]) and global industries across the globe. Standard accounts of disintermediation often flatly assume a narrative of technological determinism (and dystopianism), in which intermediaries are simply replaced by virtual technologies and platforms. As eloquently summarized by two anthropologists, "as money and payment forms are increasingly digitized, the future of financial transactions is imagined to be one in which intermediaries are no longer necessary, and where older material forms of value will decline in importance" (Tankha and Dalinghaus 2020: 345). Yet such promises of "*direct and unmediated access*" are illusory, for "no economic system can be fully disembedded from social relations and the concrete semiotic practices that mediate them" (Keane 2008: 37).

This chapter builds upon these trenchant critiques of mediation to rethink the precarious position of the broker in today's diamond industry. It does so by examining the rise of a "transparency" regime, enabled by the standardization of diamond certificates, pricing lists, and e-commerce trading platforms. Upending an assumed nexus between power and knowledge (Foucault 1980; Matthews 2005), I argue that the broker's power paradoxically lies within his professed ignorance of the goods he brokers and his studied indifference to his role within the transaction. This regime of transparency is, in effect, disrupting the strategic and necessary self-presentation of the broker *as*

[6] I take this colorful term from linguistic anthropologist Janet McIntosh, who served as a discussant for a panel on "The Cultural Production of Ignorance at 20" at the 2019 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. In her response to my paper, McIntosh noted: "Anyhow, one could keep going on the varieties of ignorance required by capitalism, and could perhaps argue that a commodity chain is an ignorance chain. The diamond broker's collusion in this ignorance chain helps the whole operation keep going. Even if the brokers 'die out,' there will still be plenty of ignorance left in that chain" (McIntosh 2019). For McIntosh's own work on (elite) ignorance, which she terms "structural oblivion," see: *Unsettled: Denial and Belonging Among White Kenyans* (McIntosh 2016).

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an ignorant and dispassionate actor, one divested of interests and sentiments. In so doing, it is not simply replacing or rendering the broker into obsolescence; rather, it is revealing the very ideological contradictions at the heart of brokerage itself.

Policing Ignorance

On the one hand, this delicate dialectic between knowledge and ignorance is not altogether specific to the position of the broker; one finds similar expressions in the policing of knowledge and the maintenance of ignorance on the manufacturing side of the diamond industry. Yekhezkel, an elderly Jewish owner of a former atelier in Antwerp, who now owns workshops in India, recounted how he would withhold the value of a rough diamond from his polishers. Here is how he reasoned it. If a polisher knew that a particular stone was valuable (i.e., worth $1 million or $0.5 million), he would become jittery and would be more likely to break it. Even when a polisher did break a stone, Yekhezkel would never disclose its value; he would simply tell the polisher to go home and rest for two days. If he disclosed the value of the stone, he reasoned, the polisher would never be able to return to work and polish with a steady hand.

In other instances, withholding information has functioned as an alibi for managerial control and the deskilling of workers (Braverman 1974). As early as 1970, a founder of French urban anthropology, Jacques Gutwirth, observed in an ethnography about Hasidic life and the diamond industry in Antwerp that:

> homework has practically disappeared, with employers preferring to group their cleavers together, not in large factory rooms but in bright rooms or offices where they work at most three or four. On the other hand, the bosses try to institute a certain division of labor by "specializing" the cleavers in certain partial phases of operations, some practicing for example the initial fragmentations, and others the finishes. Belz Hasidic cleavers[7] do not appreciate the process which, contrary to what the term "specialization" implies, actually restricts the experience and knowledge of the material and the trade,

[7] This refers to diamond cleavers from the Belz Hasidic dynasty, which has historically represented the largest Hasidic sect in Antwerp. The Belz Hasidic dynasty was originally founded by Rabbi Shalom Rokheakh in approximately 1817 in Belz, a town in eastern Galicia (Assaf 2010).

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which remain essential if they want to then work on their own. (Gutwirth 1970: 94)[8]

On the one hand, this claim of ignorance, at closer inspection, struck me as odd and unconvincing. On the other hand stood the most glaring problem: the unlikelihood of working in an industry and accruing no technical knowledge about the very commodities one brokered on a daily basis. By all accounts, diamond brokers should resemble tea brokers, whose value becomes defined precisely by their intimate relationship to or connoisseurship of a single commodity (Besky 2016). Instead, however, they represented themselves as if they worked within the financialized world of future traders in Chicago and London, where they could altogether forget which commodity they brokered (Zaloom 2006). The type of abstracted substitution that drives the world of financialized commodity future markets, however, could not be further from the world of diamond trading. While there have long been various attempts to financialize diamonds for investment schemes, the diamond commodity market has not undergone financialization; this is because, unlike nearly all other mined commodities (Ferry 2016), diamonds lack fungibility. Whereas gold's properties afford it good fitness for purposes of investment, as each bar of gold can be traded for another, one diamond can never be interchangeable for another. Each natural diamond is unique and is graded by a myriad of qualities or parameters (color, carat, cut, and clarity). Unlike other commodities, where brokers can be indifferent to distinction, diamonds are all about distinction, and yet brokers claim indifference. They claim *indifference to difference*.

The Contradictions of the Broker

Several ethnographers and historians have noted the devaluation of brokers in the trade, often citing the broker's lack of capital, of risk, or even of knowledge about diamonds as explanations for their inferiority in the industry (Laureys 2005: 32). Renee Rose Shield rehearses these familiar explanations in an ethnography of the diamond district on 47th Street in New York:

[8] Translated from French by the author.

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Brokers occupy a dubious status as they flit uncertainly between dealers who own the goods. They are essentially liminal, neither here nor there, but in between. Not only do they not own the goods, they often lack completely information about diamonds in general. Filling an essential role between two sides, these individuals are somewhat stigmatized. Like a marriage broker, they are useful in linking people together, but they are perhaps not completely necessary. (Shield 2002: 99)

On one level, Shield voices a perennial tension in the study of brokerage: Are brokers foundational to creating markets or an impediment to their functioning (Vidal 2000)? Within the anti-Semitic discourse of European economic history, Jewish brokers have been treated as unproductive "parasites" on the Christian (body) politic (Raffles 2007). Both Shield and Laureys accept a dominant historiographic account that treats brokers as ignorant or superfluous. They misrecognize how ignorance may operate as a strategy that the broker uses to maintain his role as the impartial or disinterested "third" within the transaction (Simmel 1908). This stance must constantly be maintained in their *affective* role as seemingly impartial mediators in negotiating disputes between traders. In reality, they may operate as *tertius gaudens* ("a rejoicing third"), who pit trader against trader. Gutwirth astutely observes this in his ethnography:

In order for the deal to go through, the broker strives to exploit the subjective part of the judgment of the two parties between whom he mediates, and therefore to influence this judgment. If he is clever, he uses, both towards his "boss" and towards the client, ratiocinations, flattery, various arguments relating to applied social psychology. The methods vary, but cunning and invention always have a large place. Seller and buyer are not unaware of this; however, they feel the need to hear the argumentation despite all information which will allow them in particular to determine how far the concessions of the opposing party will go. The broker must have a lot of patience, endure objections and recriminations from both parties. His professional practice is usually accompanied by a submissive attitude, and even a certain obsequiousness. (Gutwirth 1970: 87)

What nearly all of these scholars have curiously failed to theorize are the particular *gendered* qualities associated with the work of brokerage and how this relates to their devaluation in the industry. It is not altogether surprising that those actors who perform the most "feminized" affective work in a sector dominated by men, who are tasked with managing the egos of traders, who are meant to display "a lot of

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patience," "a submissive attitude, and even a certain obsequiousness" (Gutwirth 1970: 87), are those who are devalued in the industry's hierarchy.

The claim, moreover, contradicted the very interests of the broker: to accumulate the highest commission possible. In the diamond industry, the broker receives a commission. Commissions typically hover across the industry between 0.5 percent and 1 percent of the total transaction. To not seek the highest price, when presented with the opportunity, would be tantamount to self-sabotage. When I raised my suspicions about the broker's "ignorance" across my field sites, however, brokers often offered logical responses about their own ignorance and why one would desire it. If it was revealed that you had cheated a trader or played one trader against another, it could tarnish your reputation. Unlike my interaction with Shloimy, *their* interactions were not one-off transactions; to sustain their livelihoods required ongoing maintenance of their reputations within the industry. And because diamond-trading networks are often built upon dynasties of intergenerational family firms, a broker would often work across multiple generations of a trading company.

Over croissants and coffee in his apartment overlooking one of Antwerp's parks, Marcel, a middle-aged, secular Jewish ex-broker with a business degree, distilled the strategies for how to broker ignorantly. Marcel no longer worked as a broker. He would reveal, he claimed, what others would rather not share. He had no skin in the game.

There are two schools. One says the more you know, the better:

> [The more credible you] look like in front of clients. Others say the least you know, the easiest it will be for you to sell. Because if you know too much about the stone, every detail of the stone, it's hard sometimes to sell it. You don't need to know everything. If you have a parcel and it says, or a stone and it says, it's this and that, and so forth. And that's the asking price and your boss says, "This is the minimum price you can sell it for," then it's easier to work than [if] you will analyze and know everything yourself about the stone. Or maybe say you're going to lose faith in the stone if you don't agree with what your boss said about it.

What Marcel articulated can be captured through a cliché: ignorance is bliss. Conversely, knowledge could become a source of liability. Curiously enough, Marcel did *not* refer to the most obvious form of

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"liability" that we might assume: the *legal* liability of defrauding a buyer (an explanation that *was* offered to me on at least one occasion – by an internationally recognized expert in the global diamond industry).[9] This other type of liability would be the type of "willful blindness" associated with criminal law: "'the deliberate avoidance of knowledge of the facts' – that is, a person avoids gaining knowledge as a means of avoiding self-incrimination" (Bovensiepen and Pelkmans 2020: 388). But there are many varieties of "willful blindness," and we need not think about this term in such strictly legalistic terms.[10] Marcel focuses rather on the challenges that this knowledge presents to selling the stone and to the broker's confidence, and on the undue friction in this delicate arrangement between broker, boss, and diamond. The assumption in Marcel's account is that the broker could accurately assess the diamond's value. In that sense, ignorance does not reference the broker's (in)capacity to value the goods. To an extent, the question

[9] This subject is admittedly complicated by the fact that the diamond industry prefers to handle disputes "internally" (rather than relying upon state courts), a system that legal economists call "private ordering" (defined as the "development of extralegal forums and forms of dispute processing by nonhierarchical groups" [Sagy 2011: 923]). In this system of "stateless commerce" (Richman 2017), the industry resolves disputes through its own system of arbitration and relies upon the communal, nonlegal, and customary norms of the respective communities that work within the industry (Bernstein 1992). These forms of communal enforcement can only be achieved, as these legal scholars argue, in a situation of tight-knit, insular trade diasporas, or what one scholar calls an "ethnically homogenous middlemen group (EHMG)" (Landa 1981). Tehila Sagy provides a trenchant critique of the "private ordering" literature by focusing on three prototypical cases – the New York Diamond Dealers Club (DDC), Shasta County ranch owners (Ellickson 1991), and the Israeli kibbutz (Shapiro 1976) – and explains the various political-economic ideologies that drive legal scholars to focus on (and promote) "nonstate mechanisms for dispute processing" (Sagy 2011).

While merchants may not be charged in state courts (although this has certainly happened in recent years), the broker could certainly be held liable for his actions by a *bestuur* ("governing council" in Dutch) that arbitrates these disputes within the industry. A fictionalized *bestuur* case can be seen in the 2023 Netflix TV series "Rough Diamonds."

[10] In their provocative article on this subject, Judith Bovensiepen and Mathijs Pelkmans examine willful blindness across a "spectrum of intentionality – with strategic ignorance on one extreme and ignorance as embodied disposition on the other" (Bovensiepen and Pelkmans 2020: 390). On the other hand, they upset a foundational assumption in the literature – that intentionality is ever stable. Arguing from this premise, they assert "that intentionality is itself unstable, and that this instability shapes the dynamics of wilful blindness in individuals, institutions and groups" (ibid.).

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of the broker's capacity is held in abeyance (or bracketed). It is, rather, the danger of misalignment, of veering too far from the instructions of the "boss" and creating undue friction within the transaction that propels this desire for ignorance. Ignorance should not be misconstrued as a measure of (in)capacity, but rather as a measure of desire, will, and strategy. Quite to the contrary, one must have the intellectual wherewithal to know when not to know – that is, when to strategically become or remain ignorant.

Dominant scholarly accounts focus on the broker's structural position in bridging scales and translating between polities: the colonizer and the colonized (Geertz 1960), empire and its subjects (Rothman 2011), and formal and informal economies (Bailey 1963). While largely neglected by anthropologists after the decline of patron–client studies in the 1970s, and often reduced to an immoral or amoral social actor (Lindquist 2015), the figure of the broker is re-emerging in academic debates (Björkman 2021; Dua 2022; James 2011). In the most functional sense, the broker's ignorance is paramount, to perpetuate the edifice or infrastructure of the transaction. As Georg Simmel observed in an essay on "The Triad": "after all that has been said, it is clear that from an over-all viewpoint, the existence of the impartial third element serves the perpetuation of the group" (Simmel 1908: 152). In that sense, brokerage operates as a form of what I call *agnotological ideology*: the *belief* in the broker's ignorance is instrumental to the smooth operation of the transaction.[11] The public secret (Taussig 1999) is that the broker presents himself as the impartial third, when he may very well be a *tertius gaudens*, who pits trader against trader (Simmel 1908). Their (claim to) ignorance is, in a manner of speaking, itself transparent to all parties in the transaction. Their transparent ignorance is not simply productive for the transaction; the transaction *depends* upon it.

[11] I thank David Berliner for calling my attention to the fact that I am essentially describing what Pierre Bourdieu formulates as misrecognition or "miscognition." As Bourdieu argues in a section on the gift (and counter-gift) in *Pascalian Meditations*: "no one is really unaware of the logic (it constantly surfaces in explicit form, when for example someone wonders whether a present will be judged sufficient), but no one fails to comply with the rule of the game, which is to act as if one did not know the rule. We might coin the term "common miscognition" to designate the game in which everyone knows – and does not want to know – the true nature of the exchange" (Bourdieu 2000).

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The Rise of the Transparency Regime

Yet this has become more complicated in recent years, as industry actors must leave a "transparent" paper trail. Up until the late 1990s, Antwerp's diamond industry infamously operated through *zwart geld* (unreported taxable income). Diamantaires did not generate invoices for their transactions and rarely left a paper trail. Across the industry, contracts are sealed orally by uttering *mazal u'brakha* ("luck and blessing"). Indeed, Belgian authorities sought to attract diamantaires from other trading hubs (particularly Amsterdam, to which many of Antwerp's own diamantaires had migrated) throughout the first half of the twentieth century by deliberately overlooking illicit practices (Vanden Daelen 2018: 67). When the center of the diamond industry shifted to Amsterdam in the early twentieth century, for example, Belgium attracted its "Diamond Jews" to return through "incentives," including "turning a blind eye towards monitoring the industry's bookkeeping, workplace conditions, and adherence to employment laws" (67). After World War II, moreover, these incentives included "wage rises, return bonuses, practical and financial help in repatriation, and granting of citizenship" (67).

Beginning in the 1950s, the Belgian government enabled money laundering and the circulation of *zwart geld* by creating the "Don Pedro" system. At this historical moment, countries including Spain, Greece, and Italy (and several North African countries) banned the importing of diamonds. As explained by Eddy Vleeschdrager, a prominent leader in the diamond industry:

> [A]s there were no export licenses, [these] buyers usually came to Antwerp carrying cash and returned unnoticed to their countries with the stones, avoiding any sort of billing. Antwerp diamond dealers found themselves in situations where large sales went unrecorded. The Belgian Government proposed that the industry create "artificial bills" for such sales, bills that would be referred to as "Don Pedro." (Goldstein 1999)

In the 1980s, however, the European Union began to introduce legislation combating money laundering and tax evasion. In 1986, Belgian authorities raided Roger Kirschen & Company for engaging in tax fraud on behalf of their clients in the diamond industry (Casert 1986). In 1991, Phillipe Maystadt, the Belgian finance minister, announced the end of the Don Pedro system. Although the diamond industry in

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Antwerp managed to find workarounds to this increased scrutiny for a time, Belgian lawmakers passed increasingly strict legislation in 1995 that required banks to disclose the true identities of parties involved in their clients' transactions. The Belgian government, keen to capture a vast reserve of unreported income from the diamond industry, raided diamond offices, froze bank accounts, seized diamonds, and arrested those charged with tax evasion. It also investigated the banks that facilitated tax evasion, notably including Bank Max Fischer (Du Bois 1997). International anti-money laundering and legislation countering the financing of terrorism only intensified after 9/11, as the United States Congress passed the International Money Laundering Abatement and Anti-Terrorist Financing Act of 2001. The diamond industry became directly implicated, as smuggled diamonds became associated with the financing of global terrorist networks (e.g., Al-Qaeda). With the collapse of diamond banks, international banks that historically serviced the diamond industry (e.g., ABN AMRO) now offer far fewer lines of credit and bank loans to the midstream pipeline of the diamond industry. Between 2013 and 2019 alone, the diamond industry witnessed a $5 billion decrease in financing from banks (marking a 30 percent decline) (Bain & Company 2019).

In this epistemic regime, transparency becomes tethered to knowledge through the due diligence of "Know Your Customer" measures, which require that traders submit invoices (among other measures) to the Belgian government. This indirectly poses a threat to brokers. Through the Don Pedro system, brokers could historically shield both parties from knowledge of the other's existence altogether. In that sense, the brokers not only benignly serve a search function, but may be enlisted to perform an *anonymizing* function within the industry, connecting parties who would otherwise refuse to conduct business. The broker could connect those who either do not know one another or wish not to know one another. Invoices now reveal each party's identity, making transparent or, more precisely, de-anonymizing the identities of the parties involved. Traders can now more easily disintermediate brokers, transacting directly with the other party once they learn their identity – thereby cutting out the broker and the commission owed to him.

Moreover, the standardization of diamond certification now mediates nearly all transactions, alongside transparent price lists revealed to

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industry actors through downloadable Rapaport pricing reports and listings on e-commerce platforms such as RapNet. A "modernized" regime of diamond certificates and pricing lists has replaced the craft of valuation with a lab-certified document, thereby disrupting a sociality of salescraft (Cross and Heslop 2019) marked by contingency and contestation, improvisation and haggling. While diamond certification emerged in the 1970s, the technology was largely reserved for larger stones – that is, above a certain weight or carat. In a move toward greater standardization (in the name of transparency), traders increasingly certified even smaller stones. For the broker, this disrupted the necessary and *desired* asymmetry of information needed to conduct business. There needed to be a proper balance between those knowing and those "not-caring-to-know" (Last 1981) – whether it be the identity of a trader, which invoices now revealed, or the value of the diamond itself, which diamond certificates revealed by objectifying seemingly arbitrary characteristics of color and clarity into "scientifically" transparent, self-evident facts. Susan Falls distills the process in her ethnography of diamond branding and consumption:

> GIA [diamond lab] creates meaningful discriminations through a highly contrived grading system that is then mapped onto a grading sheet called a "certificate." Control over grading is assured by the use of specialized jargon, tools, and knowledge, all carefully leaked to the public in an effort to guide perceptions. What grading does, then, is maneuver the seemingly similar into a hierarchy of value. (Falls 2014: 57)

Although accurate in her assessment, for purposes of analyzing the diamond "certificate" in relationship to the retail sector of the industry, Falls fails to realize how the diamond certificate has also radically reshaped the nature of trade and salescraft on the wholesale side of the supply chain. Parameters that could once be debated and haggled over between traders *through* a broker are now non-negotiable. They have been codified as law through the materiality of the standardized diamond certificate.

Disintermediation and Racialized Nostalgia

Yet it would be equally inaccurate to suggest that diamond traders and brokers explain the precarity of the diamond broker's position as the consequence of a faceless abstraction (although many *do* frequently opine about the "transparency" of the industry). Baked into narratives

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about the crisis or "extinction" of the diamond broker (to borrow Shloimy's language) are racialized accusations. The culprits of disintermediation are often (unsurprisingly) foreigners and strangers. Gujarati Indian traders entered the market and disrupted the delicate ecosystem of trust between Jewish "familiars."

Before guiding me around the trading hall, Shloimy admitted to me that "there was always people who wanted to cut the brokerage out. The brokers were the easiest target to get rid of it." He described the process by which this often occurs:

> The main thing where it happens a lot – you bring up a customer, a big customer, into an office. And the first two times, the trade goes through you. Now – as you bring him up – you brought him up, he knows the address. He knows on his invoice the address. He would go behind your back, just plainly go to the office. Then you see him once. "*Shalom Aleikhem*, what are you doing here without me?"

While acknowledging that Jewish traders also engaged in this behavior, Shloimy attributed it as a unique attribute of "the Indians":

> It sometimes – the Indians, especially the Indians – they used to cut the brokers once they knew [who] the customer [was]. They cut the brokers. They went behind your back.

Indeed, Shloimy connected another major site of disintermediation, internet e-commerce, to the "nature" of Indian traders: "The internet is for sure, especially the Indians who have a *tayve*, a tendency, to go behind his back. This internet was for them . . . the Indians looked for every opportunity to cut out." Shloimy locates this transformation within a particular historical development: the rise of internet e-commerce sales and the broader trend toward "transparency" within the diamond industry. In reality, however, even before the implementation of formal invoicing procedures and far before the emergence of internet e-commerce, as one trader recounted, traders had often tasked their female secretaries with surreptitiously trailing brokers around diamond traders' offices to discover the other party's identity.

Conclusion

There is a curious similarity between the way diamond brokers talk about their own relationship to the diamond industry and the way many of Antwerp's Jews talk about their relationship to the Belgian

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government. Both often articulated their subject position as the "collateral damage" of a bureaucratic apparatus that intends to harm others, but always exceeds its target. Many of the Jews I met in Antwerp referred to themselves as the "collateral damage" of state policies targeted at their Muslim neighbors, like austerity measures targeted at harming "strangers" (*allochtonen*) by manipulating child allowances (*kindergeld*), anti-slaughtering legislation passed to ban *halal* meat, and investigations into the "secular" education taught at religious schools. Each of these measures inevitably threatened the religious Jewish community. And yet, often anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim themselves, they voted for the very politicians who passed these measures.

And while the analogy does not completely hold, brokers often positioned themselves as the collateral damage of transparency measures within the industry or the "unintended consequences, what might be called the side effects … or spill overs … produced by legal and bureaucratic processes" (Tuckett 2018). Indeed, many expressed a sense of the inevitability of their own erasure from the supply chain. Most brokers asked why I chose to study *them*, rather than a host of other workers being cut from supply chains across the globe. And yet, perhaps with an equal sense of obstinance, I have sought to outline a more complex and less totalizing account of "disintermediation" than the narrative often given to us about the future of work and technology.

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