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The death of American homes: A consideration of everyday objects, ritual, and emotions at the estate sale

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THE DEATH OF AMERICAN HOMES

A consideration of everyday objects, ritual, and emotions at the estate sale



DAVID S. SPARKS

***The Death of American Homes: A consideration of everyday objects,
ritual, and
emotions
at the estate sale***

written by David Stiles Sparks '19

advised by Martha Kaplan (1st reader) and Louis Römer (2nd reader)

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Anthropology

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- David

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A Necessarily Long Introduction

Terms of Sale: Situating the Estate Sale

“You might want to get out of the way, David. You’re bound to get knocked over standing there. . . you never know what’ll happen when the crowd comes in!” Sam warns me with a tiny chuckle, before suddenly whipping off to another part of the house, rag in hand, for last minute preparations before the sale. I check my phone: It’s 8:55 A.M., five minutes before the sale starts. I gaze out the window at a long line spiraling down the driveway, mostly filled with cheerful older folk, predominately white, chatting lively as they patiently wait to enter. I hear car doors close as more guests continue arriving; some of them have been here since 8:00 A.M.—before the employees running the sale even arrived. In the Company’s absence—the order and ‘law’ of the sale—informal numbers were made by those waiting to hold their space on ripped pieces of paper with hand-written numbers, a democratic and equal system informally made by those early birds to ensure order of the line, and more importantly, that they’re the first ones that get to enter and get *whatever* could potentially be there.

I move my eyes to the room I'm in, an uncanny kitchen in a 'home' or a 'market'—I'm not quite sure what to call it—where hopeful items, mirroring those in line outside, excitedly wait: The cabinets have been meticulously emptied—their insides spilled out, organized, and priced. The island in the middle is filled with various types of crystal glass ware—blues, greens, some crystal clear, shining from some recent attention and a fresh clean. My eyes cut to the right where twenty-five or so coffee cups of varying colors and shapes sit on grey, marble counter-top. Some have fun advertising symbols and others with mentions of places and landmarks, hoping to be noticed and used once again as before. If we were having a potluck, there would be enough dishes in the kitchen to provide for everyone waiting outside in line, but instead of waiting to be used, the items are waiting for a new owner, waiting to be sold, to be loved again for a moment and then to fade into the background of someone's everyday life. By the end of the sale, all the items in the kitchen and greater home will be gone, some in loving homes and others at the bottom of plastic garbage bags.

It's now 8:58 A.M. The crowd becomes a bit more antsy as the opening time approaches. Will, the owner of the Company, announces some general rules and regulations to the hungry crowd at the door, and they inch closer with their tickets in hand. I ready myself behind a bar in the kitchen where I am sure to see the door opening—the stampede rushing to the watering hole—without getting trampled upon. The clock strikes 9:00 A.M. The flood gates are opened. 40 bodies rush into the house. No one looks at me, the employees, or at each other: the game is on. Instead, each guest walks rapidly through the house, scanning each room and the goods displayed for sale, trying to simultaneously interpret for the first time a new home and to discover the 'gems' of the sale before someone else snatches them up. Some

regulars, of course, will stop and say hello to the employees or other customers they have grown to know by name, giving the common courtesies required of friends. But this is only for a second, and those who do exchange pleasantries immediately avert their eyes back to scanning through a home. They are on a hunt: Unlike a regular store, there is usually only one or two or perhaps a set of an item. Once it's gone, you're out of luck. This is probably the most common type of 'hunt' people in cultures characterized by mass consumption go on, hunts for used goods. After five minutes of shopping, 9:05 A.M., an additional 40 bodies are let into the sale. Those eager shoppers now entering for the first time almost identically match the behaviors of the first 40: mostly ignoring those other guests and employees in their way and focusing on the bulk of the sale. Those first 40, now having seen every room once or twice, move through the space over and over again, looking and looking and looking to ensure nothing was missed in their search through the sometimes overbearing number of items for sale. With more people, the home now becomes a bit more cramped, but it's not overbearing: the house has been organized to make sure all of these bodies can fit comfortably and so larger pieces of the home like furniture can be extracted. Sometimes, accidents do happen like a glass accidentally being broken. But that's okay! The point of the sale is to make a little money and leave a home empty, so a small causality here and there actually helps the process.

As the day goes on, the atmosphere of estate sales usually begins to settle down and become more calm. In an environment with less stakes—usually because those that are 'serious' or 'competitive' shoppers are gone having made their purchases—buyers can relax and interact with the space, other people, and the material items inhabiting it in a less hurried manner. In their shopping practices, now characterized by careful consideration and sorting

through things, shoppers in a way play with items, striking up conversations with them and giving creative, imaginative narratives to them, often ones that are partly interwoven with their own lives and experiences. Customers talk to one another about tastes of former owners or comment on the savvy or interesting finds of another lucky shopper. Sometimes, those shopping talk to no one at all as they make comment on how an object looks, the size of certain garments, or on the taste of the home itself. Discourses about past owners, individual memories of customers, and things like who the house will go to or what happened to the owners themselves sneak into the sale and fill the halls, even though items directly mentioning or referencing a family has been removed intentionally by the Company. The items are ‘realized’ as something other than sheer commodities and instead are seen as things that have the potential already to be ‘storied’ by a former owner. But this type of abstraction found within these assemblages of things doesn’t inhibit purchases because this is just ‘shopping talk’ and momentary fun—not the real motivation for coming to a sale, which is the items themselves and the potential to take them home. After being momentarily struck by items, shoppers either move on to the next goods for consideration or pick up that item to the check-out counter.

This is the basic atmosphere of the American estate sale based upon my own experiences over the last seven or so years, attending them both as a shopper and researcher. Above all else, the estate sale is a very active space with constant movement, filled with excitement, colors, textures, shapes, and smells you may have never experienced before. Every estate sale I have been to has been different and felt completely new in its construction, but they have all offered windows and moments into the lives of who potentially owned these

goods and even considerations of my own personal life and past, as I found things I once knew in my life or discovered some good that struck a memory. This transformative experience with used goods is not simply my own visceral and personal interaction to material things but can be found in the experiences of other estate sale attendees I have talked to during my research or in the conversations I have overheard shoppers having while shopping. If you look past the sometimes banal chairs, clothing, jewelry, and trinkets that make up an estate sale and dig deep into the social happenings that get ignored in the face of all the stuff making up a sale, like these small conversations, the estate sale can be seen as a complex ritual that can give us deep insights into how Americans use material culture in the construction of home, family, and identity.

Small moments of conversation like surface level ‘shopping talk’ or the conversation employees have as they sort through goods not their own—normally ignored for their lack of ‘depth’ or ‘social significance’—show how strangers begin to understand the deaths of unfamiliar homes and to some level, persons absent from a sale. Death as a force—whether it be assumed or projected onto a home by visitors at an estate sale—transforms cultural understandings of spaces and items for participants through death’s ability to leap from objects to bodies and back again. The way that death touches both the material culture and participants of estate sales in their descriptions of items and feelings towards them—even when there is not necessarily a death of a person—suggests that significant social transformations are taking place. When small moments of conversation and unimportant utterances are drawn out and explored for their true social significance, they are shown to be moments of ethnographic insight that offer interesting understandings of death. This

understanding is contrary to how death itself is represented in popular culture and also within the scholarship on American death practices, which describe death as a form of dramatic rupture. While this may be so in cases of close loss, the relative ease at which estate sale participants and employees alike move through the material remains of homes—quite literally the material remains of people—and the way they talk about those items provides an understanding of death that is more common, every day, and imaginable. Estate sales provide an arena and process to talk about death and loss, reckoning with these complex ideas in withdrawn ways through a material environment.

Through the ritual process of sorting, staging, and selling, homes and the items within them transform in meaning for the various participants taking part in the process, and they express part of this transformation through how they discuss the items they find. One cannot attend an estate sale without at least momentarily being transformed by the material and social world that particular home represents. Whether it be the imaginative narrative abilities shoppers momentarily think as they explore and shop through dying homes; the thoughts of employees as they find personal documents, family photos, and taboo goods like sex toys or drug paraphernalia in staging; or the emotional responses of family members to accepting the death of a home, and in most of the cases, persons. Even when death is not the reason for an estate sale, the death of a home creates intense emotions because it is the unraveling of home and family life. It is something people should not see—something that is usually private and even touched with a bit of the sacred—and when little information is given to buyers or estate sale employees, it is hard to read a dying home is read as nothing other than a dying home;

senses of death slips into homes in a strange way and touches everyone involved at varying levels.

Besides this thesis being only an analysis of the estate sale and how goods change meaning through its processes of sorting, it is also an exploration of how material culture and things are used in the construction of culture, senses of identity, memory, and places like home in societies defined in part by their mass consumption. Quite simply put, we use things to think with and construct senses of self; humans construct their material worlds, and in return, their material worlds help construct them, working to orient behaviors and practices that make up culture. Death does a strange thing to material culture, and the ways that varying individuals interact with things through the stages of preparation for an estate sale is paradigmatic for this process. To explore how estate sales can help us further our understandings of death and material culture studies more generally, I bring together the work of scholars in the fields of anthropology, sociology, literary studies, and social history who focus their work generally on the topics of death, material cultural, memory, family, consumption, and social constructions of home, and use their voices to consider and position my own ethnographic field work with an estate sale company.

Making the Estate Sale ‘Strange’: Geertz and Thick Description

As a regular attendee of estate sales, these are places that are very familiar for me. I have attended them for some seven years now, and this familiarity can sometimes be difficult for a researcher because things can become obvious and second nature. Because of these

personal connection to the estate sale, it was necessary in my research to take the position of someone other than a shopper, as a temporary 'employee' of an estate sale company. Although some of my insights as a shopper are used throughout the work at times, found in my research that I missed lots of things that went on at estate sale because I was busy shopping for myself. From this new vantage point, it became easier for me to write about estate sales in this thesis as locations to explore larger American cultural relationships to things and dying because I was in a new role that showed different practices and required alternate activities than when I attended estate sales as a shopper. This new perspective allowed for me to explore a site I thought I knew by seeing the entire process up close, making it a bit strange.

This concept of making the familiar strange is a classic methodology used in American anthropology, coming from the famous anthropologist Clifford Geertz and his writings on thick description. Outlined in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz calls for anthropologists and other scholars of cultures to consider in their analyses the larger social significances and meanings that come from the particular social behaviors they document, versus presenting surface-level documentation of items or cultural practices without further analysis or nuance outside of that moment of research. Sure, someone may move their eye in a certain way, but what does that mean socially and historically? Is it a twitch, a wink, or mimicry? Without detailed context and further exploration—or as Geertz would label it, a thick description—there is much information lost that can help the ethnographer understand fundamental qualities of cultures and societies they work with and study. Learning about social meanings helps to situate behaviors into appropriate contexts and provide deeper readings of culture (Geertz 1973: 7-9).

While the estate sale may seem strange to some of my readers who have never attended them, they are essentially supermarkets created inside of homes, two places I feel free arguing are universal in American culture and locations most Americans feel comfortable, although very open as symbols and expressed in different ways based on a number of factors like region, race, class, gender, etc. Estate sales are, thus, not that strange, and I'm sure if you landed in one, you would easily follow along, be able to shop, and not think of your activities or responses in larger social contexts once you leave that space; therefore, to highlight the significance of events at the estate sale and describe how they are able to provide larger commentaries on culture and materiality in American social life, the estate sale and things both needs to be made strange for the reader through the use of Geertz's thick description and a discussion of Marx's 'dancing' table.

Every weekend in towns and counties across the United States, houses die. Through a routinized ritual of consumption and death, more commonly known as the estate sale, homes are physically ripped apart and transformed as their material insides are taken from their active sites of use and reconsidered, remembered, recontextualized, and ultimately removed through a large weekend sale, with the end goal of leaving a home empty for a new owner and family to eventually inhabit. And after this process—the antithesis to an entire lifetime of accumulation and consumption which, coupled with social activity, come to represent ideas of home themselves—there is little left but walls, fixtures, and built-ins. This removal of the insides removes this sense of home, place, and person that are found stuck to the assemblages of objects that constitute a home.

This death of homes seen in the estate sale are not the type of death we experience as individuals—one marked by a final, flash of a moment, where we are taken from our material world and bodies. It is not sudden. Companies and families alike work tirelessly for weeks—sometimes years—to explore, organize, and stage homes as temporary market places. Because of the emotional nature of homes in the places of American families, this process of sorting is innately contradictory and difficult for families—let alone physically and temporally a challenge in our busy world. The death of a house often suggests the end of a family's social life, a change of familial dynasties and hierarchies: it marks large social transitions for everyone involved. Very often in the ritual of estate sales, the deaths of homes are predicated by the death of a person or persons, although some estate sales take place for other life-shifting reasons like divorce, debt, downsizing, or moving across the country. The death of homes, however, is also found in these decisions and social processes, the same type of destruction of the self and family, as ideas of what home is and who constitute it shift by the absence and silence of both human bodies and material culture. But in this destruction, meaning is re-found and made in surprising and usually ignored sites of social experiences.

People reconsider their place in the world and their standing in social relationships through this ritual of sorting things: closets, cabinets, drawers, and deep spaces of homes, like crawlspaces or the attic where things are often left forgotten to decay, are cleaned and decluttered. Items that have not seen the light of day in 15 years are put into consideration with those that were used two weeks ago by their former owners. The innate nosey-ness found in us all comes out, as we enter spaces and places in the home usually taboo: it's not exactly couth to uninvitedly rifle through another's things, unless invited or that owner is no longer in

this world. Items are lined up and examined for both their economic and memorial purposes, and categorically assigned value in some way, to speak generally, depending upon who is doing the sorting and the personal histories or connections that may exist with that specific item or home; the forgotten and background of items of life—even forgotten memories one may have never knew they had in the first place—are brought to the forefront of one’s mental energy and noticed, once again given new potential for use in human social life. These memories can be both good and bad, and have within them the potential to cause pain, suffering, or triggers for past traumas. But, the sorting itself offers a moment of personal reflection, reflection on the family, and if the person died, reflections on that person.

In the process of a home’s death, things are intentionally selected to be kept by family members or friends for plural and multiple reasons. Some mimic the ways that the bodies of Christian Saints in the Middle Ages would slowly be stripped away after death—by the flesh, hair, nails, bones, clothes and all, made into magical relics by those at their funeral for their supposed importance and holy value—using objects and material remains as very literal extensions for those gone. Others people simply always liked or fancied something they took, like a particular set of dishes or a piece of furniture. Memory and taste are both at work to various levels. But the rest of the items that are deemed unimportant or unneeded, or perhaps too large or heavy, or maybe even too emotionally encumbering, are either donated or sold in an estate sale. Besides simply not wanting certain items for reasons of personal taste, a popular reason I’ve heard for selling include that there simply is no space in the homes of decedents for goods, death in American is very expensive, and American’s are living longer lives, leaving larger medical debts and funeral costs for decedents. People already have their own houses filled with

stuff they've accumulate over many years themselves, and most of the time, there's no room for another dining room table or set of couches. The costs of paying for storage, the clutter of packing the contents of one home into another in boxes, and the costs associated with death make these decisions of what to keep and what to get rid of even more difficult, often causing much stress and anxiety for family members.

For this reason, in my years of attending estate sales, I have only ever attended one sale in my memory not conducted by an estate sale company. American rituals of home deaths can be difficult for the plethora of reasons listed above, even destroying families in some cases, so many families elect to use a company. In the case when a company is used, the process of sorting and its effects on the family is not negated entirely, especially the way memory functions for families in these rituals; sometimes, families can even focus more on their own personal, emotional feelings and attachments when not also having to worrying about also moving and selling and staging the house for buyers. Estate sale companies make the process a little easier. The best firms have industry expertise, loads of publicity and advertising, and the know-how to deconstruct a home with care without it overwhelming them. Most families deconstruct a home a few times in their lives, while estate sale companies do three to four a month. Their experience and practice as professionals allow them to move beyond these sticky associations and moments that can come up when clearing a home and make the process long and difficult, particularly because of the social distance between the former owners and employees.

Like a mortician in many ways preparing a body for a funeral, estate sale company employees make the home presentable and clean, staging it as a quasi-home and marketplace.

This practice takes place behind closed doors, and I was fortunate to work with an estate sale company as a worker and researcher for a month last Summer. They make the messy death of a home clean and digestible for buyers. To do this, they remove things that are difficult even for them to sort through at times, things that are particularly touched with a sense of death, like family photographs, personal items like journals and scrapbooks, and even things like clumps of hair and baby teeth. Embarrassing items that would add to someone's shame after death, like drug paraphernalia or pornography are removed as well. Besides simply organizing the home, they sanitize it. If it can be sold—legally, that is—an estate sale company will probably sell it for you. Estate sale companies organize homes into distinct but vast categories so that everything can have a proper place and so that the space looks attractive and neat. Kitchens will have their china and pans on display on the countertops instead of inside of the cabinets; dining room tables will have enough dishes to serve 150 people, but the dishes will be separated in sets, as though waiting to be put to proper use. Paintings and mirrors found in the attic and garage are placed on empty hooks on the walls, remnants of what family members took in the first stages of the ritual. One room will always be designated the holiday room, and one will be able to experience the colors and décor of Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter at once. Each of the items that are considered by estate sale employees are priced at a relatively low point for their value, because the goal of the estate sale is to both clear the house and earn money. While there are some exceptions to this rule, like when selling things like coins, jewelry, fur, vehicles, or high-dollar merchandise, to accomplish the goals of the ritual, the price needs to be at the right point.

After the employees' hard work of making the home a clean, presentable market, shoppers of all ages and classes are invited to participate in sales. Before many sales open, buyers line up outside to be the first to get prized items they saw in photos posted on websites like EstateSales.net and EstateSales.org. It is not unheard of to find customers themselves creating rules and systems to ensure their place in line and that they are not cut, like making their own numbers on slips of paper. And because estate sale companies often keep email lists, websites, and Facebook pages updated with content for their customers, and because there are only so many sales each weekend in a town, the same faces are often seen at sales, creating a type of community where some members know each other on a first name basis, and others are nemeses of the small-town estate sale world. But overall, a friendly atmosphere surrounds the estate sale, as is intended. Otherwise, no one would be anything!

As shoppers attend and buy the remaining pieces of a home not taken during the initial stages of a home's death at estate sales, the items they examine during their shopping also take up new meanings. In the place of the estate sale, when the items are *in situ* and shoppers see their to-be items in an assemblage and home not their own, they imaginatively construct senses of identity, place, and person and automatically assume death of some distant owner who had to have lived here and constructed this place. Like the objects themselves are sticky with personal memories and senses of person for close relative and friends, vague and blurry senses of identity persist without contextualization. While watching buyers to make sure nothing was stolen during my field research, I would eavesdrop on conversations, hearing comments as people shopped: *"Look at this sweater. . . This was such a small woman."* *"Oh! Well. . . She had interesting taste. . . You don't see this type of style every day. . ."* *"I just love*

this kitchen! She had exactly the taste I did—I love these little Fat Chefs.” The crowded and uncanny world of material culture that estate sales present to customers often requires this type of commentary to make sense of sales because they are not traditional super markets; it is as though these statements are forced from our bodies by our material surroundings. They slip out, and we can’t help it.

While these subtle comments on material culture may seem like ordinary, unessential bits of shopping habit, they show a textured attention toward greater social and cultural movements that took place in that home: tastes, memories, and histories. Even in the case when a person did not die, and an estate sale was being conducted, death was projected onto the material goods being sold because of an absence of person. Someone *had* to have owned these things and lived in this place. In our minds, homes and things don’t exist without us. This offers incredible insights into how people re-categorize items that are now ownerless and objects that are touched by death. These are some big statements I have suggested the estate sale provides as a social site, but how is this possible? How do things transform in meaning at estate sales if they have value already determined in culture? How can a simple, every day thing do so much? To understand these feature of things, they need to, too, be made strange like the estate sale.

Making Things ‘Strange,’ Seeing Things ‘Dance’: Orientations Towards Things, Death, and The Structure of the Thesis

One scholar first known for making things particularly ‘strange’ in his analysis of materiality is no other than Karl Marx, the father of communist thought and contemporary material studies as we know it, with his idea of the fetish. Marx’s idea of fetishism is essential that items are socially transformed by their cultural uses which turn them into fantastic abstract symbols. Through this process, their context of origin, the marker/labor that went into them, and the raw resources used in their production are made irrelevant by users of those items who reduce them to abstract values, especially those related to exchange. From this process, items are reduced to their value as commodities and relate to other commodities in their ability to be traded for different goods (174-5).

These transformation of commodities Marx talks about can be fruitful when thinking of the meanings everyday items provide at the estate sale, but Marx’s idea of the fetish is drenched in themes of exploitation and violence—from his initial writings and the centuries of scholarship by those following the Marxists tradition—that often make difficult any type of analysis attempting to show the ability of commodities and everyday goods to create social meaning; he also focuses almost entirely on production, ignoring consumption as an entire field of social activity that other scholars like Daniel Miller (1987, 2010) and Elizabeth Chin (2014) have shown offer intense meaning to those in cultures characterized by mass consumptions like those in West. The analyses Marx offers, thus, differ a bit and distract from my understanding of goods in consumer society, one that attempts to show meaning in every day, ‘nonessential’ goods, which is more in tune with these more contemporary theorists. For these respectful differences in opinion, I do not cite Marx heavily in this work, but in Volume I of his monumental *Capital*, I am inspired and intrigued by his early use of what I would consider an

early use of thick description as described by Geertz in the way that Marx describes fetishism in relation to 'dancing tables'. Marx writes:

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs, or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour. It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. *Nevertheless, the table continues to be wood, an ordinary sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will* (Marx 1867: 163, *my emphasis*).

While Marx perhaps never saw a table 'dance' in front of him or move on its own accord, I feel that his provocative metaphor of its dancing and moving as a free agent offers valuable insights into the commodity and its potentiality within culture and history to transcend 'sensuousness' and sometimes extend beyond our own control. Marx attends in this description to the ability of items to pick up meaning and move beyond their sheer physicality into something that can move bodies through their ability to 'dance'. Marx describes the table as itself flipping through space upside down as a material object, itself picking up various meanings as a material body and commodity, which through its "wooden brain" it itself acts and "evolves . . . grotesque ideas" (163).

With this description of a table and considering Marx's idea of the commodity as something abstracted from its physical nature and something transactional, how can the table simultaneously "be wood, an ordinary sensuous thing" and stand out against other

commodities if it is reduced from human bodies in the process of alienation? How can it be worthy of a certain, transactional value and 'flip on its head'? This shows the innate contradictions in Marx's understanding of fetishism and the meaning commodities can take up as consumers use them. This argument is taken up in literary theorist Bill Brown's book *A Sense of Things* (2003) in his discussion of this same passage. Brown writes that in this moment of *Capital*, "Marx intimates not the fetishism he theorized but the more pedestrian, not to say less powerful, fetishism through which objects captivate us, fascinate us, compel us to have a relation to them, which seems to have little to do with their relation to other commodities ". . . This relation. . . involves desire, pleasure, frustration, a kind of pain" (Brown 2003: 27-29). From this reading of Marx, I find his metaphor of 'dancing' objects useful to describe the complex nature of objects at the estate sale and their multi-referential meanings, as they dance for shoppers to try and get them to buy them. These items have so many alternative meanings as this work will show, and these items are most certainly not ordinary commodities as Marx described. 'Dancing', I feel, is the most appropriate way to describe them.

Extending Marx's metaphor to describe the meaning found in objects, objects can do different dances for different people, depending on their understanding of that objects coming from their particular place in life at that moment and the environment it is in. These orientations towards objects are difficult to describe, but the work of Sara Ahmed is helpful for understanding why certain objects have deep meanings in their circulation. In her essay "Happy Objects," Ahmed tells us that "to be affected by something is to evaluate that thing. Evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn toward things. To give value to things is to shape what is near us" (Ahmed 2010: 31). Things that give us pleasure are located near our bodies, and from our

experiences with these 'good' things, create fields of orientations towards objects and, thus, register those we experience as good or bad based on these orientations and how they affect us (31-2). These feelings can jump from items to whatever is around that object, whether it be a specific special location or based on a specific time through one's memory (33). We can "catch" these feelings from how proximate those objects are to us. Whatever we do get joy from, however, is already predetermined and based upon cultural and individual experiences with 'happy' objects. This is because these items already have the intention of causing a happiness, a type of intentionality that Ahmed describes as "end oriented," or "what we aim for, as an endpoint, or even an end in itself" (35) When we do not derive pleasure from an object that was once 'happy', Ahmed tell us ". . .we become alienated---out of line with an affective community" (37). These moments often lead to a number of emotional responses to fill these gaps of meaning, but Ahmed states that in that during this alienation "[w]e become strangers or affect aliens" (37).

This process of alienation described by Ahmed in the transformations of an object's orientation, I argue in this thesis, is most often found in American culture in the loss of close relatives or friends. In her essay "Thinking beyond rupture," sociologist Julie Ellis examines the dominance of a rupture model in the literature of Western dying studies and how it obscures the more everyday practices and mundane nature of death (Ellis 2013: 251-252). The literature has often described it as a blanket process of extreme rupture outside of everyday life; It is the 'biggest' event in one's life that they bravely experience alone, and it marks dramatic changes and crises for all of those involved, especially in the form of large and extreme displays of emotion (252). It is considered as the ultimate terror and the "ultimate threat to social stability

and life's meaningfulness" especially as it relates to the idea of one's identity being lost (252). While close family members do experience this type of rupture in many cases of unexpected death, repeat interviews with nine families who live with a relative living with a life-threatening illness conducted by Ellis showed, however, how death finds its way into the everyday practices of these families and become more of a grounded, accepted concept (256). This type of "hegemony" of ruptural thinking within studies of death is what leads to these moments of the everyday to be pushed aside for these larger expressions of grief and emotions (254). By 'knowing' that the death of their loved one was proximate, Ellis saw in her ethnographic interviews a more social and relational process of death that was mediated through every day interactions, as individuals came to terms with the death through the required actions of life that are not "big" or "essential" at all and through the changing of everyday habits to perform proper care. Through these moments, a much less scary idea of death was created because these families had to find a way to deal with the death and its effects on the body of their loved one, to care for their loved ones, and through this, they could begin to realize what this loss would mean through these changes in everyday life.

Using Ellis' argument that rupture models obscure everyday experiences of death in the families where a member has a life-threatening illness, I feel the rupture model similarly delegitimizes the subtle commentary of estate sale shoppers and their sometimes unaware discussions of death at the estate sale because of the way items 'dance' for customers. Estate sales offer interesting platforms for death to be mentioned and discussed in vague ways, yet these items do not pick up on the sticky atmosphere of death and create objects that are disgusting or emotionally striking for customers with no personal connection or proximity to

that household. We know this because people at estate sales do not feel like vultures picking bones. Death itself is not always the reason for an estate sale, interestingly, accounting for a 51.89% of sales according to a 2018 Industry Survey by EstateSales.net (EstateSales.Net 2018: "Industry Survey"). In my research, none of the homes I attended sales as an employee had past owners that were dead, yet customers still used language that assumed the owners had passed in each sale. This type of language I will argue suggests that the estate sale offers alternative to this rupture model and allows for strangers of the deceased to mediate general ideas of death, the death of a stranger represented by an estate sales contents, the death of a specific individual through the memory an object strikes, and/or perhaps one's own death in subtle ways through their interaction with the material world.

This thesis, then, is about orientations towards objects and how the death of homes and people changes those orientations for the various participants in the process, depending on their proximity to that person, from close family members, to companies, to strangers. The estate sale is just a larger part of this process of a home's death, but as a ritual arena where these items are taken to new heights. For easy organization, the structure of the thesis, thus, roughly follows this chronological process of a home's dying. It starts with the first stages of the process where families first begin to sift through and intentionally select some items to keep from a home. In this first section, "The Death of A Family Home," I describe the experience of cleaning out my Great Grandmother's, Mamaw Stiles, after her death, using autoethnography to talk about the emotional transformations that take places in consideration of home goods and senses of home entirely. I elected to use autoethnographic techniques because my field research allowed little opportunities to study homes that just started the process of death, nor

did the month of field research allow me sufficient time to create relationships with clients to ask the deeply emotional questions that are necessary to study this stage of death. I also use some ethnographic case studies on emotions and material culture by the likes of Margaret Gibson, Daniel Miller, and Fiona Parrot with some unlikely voices such as literary critic Bill Brown and Michael Taussig. This section also briefly considers scholarship on homes as social spaces to characterize the emotional breadth that exist within homes in American social life, using the work of Allison Clarke on homes as places of social aspiration.

Next, the work examines the estate sales as American rituals of death and consumption using the work of the late Barbara Meyerhof and her provoking writings on new and 'no-once' rituals. I take her work on Jewish American rituals to deepen ethnographic insights gathered from a month of field research with an estate sale company, Five Continents Estate Sales¹, who, for ease of writing, I will refer to throughout this work as "the Company." In this chapter, "Estate Sale as Ritual," I write about their business practices of the Company as they met with clients, cleaned houses, priced items, and staged goods for sales during a month of field work; the chapter is particularly interested in how employees interact with the material environment of homes, clients, and one another as they work; it also looks a bit at the estate sale industry and offers some insights into the specific practices and policies of the company I worked with. In the second half of Chapter 3, I focus on the event of the estate sale and how buyers respond to the staged material environment of what is now both a home and liminal sale. Ethnographic vignettes help to establish a sense of how buyers act at estate sales and place themselves

¹ For the privacy of the Company, their clients and their employees, I have chosen to change the name of the company to "Five Continents Estate Sales" and to discuss any person encountered in the research by their first name only.

within these uncanny spaces. Estate sales are briefly compared with the garage sale, another American ritual of consumption and identity transformation, using the impressive work of anthropologist and garage sale expert Gretchen M. Hermann. This comparison furthers our understanding of the affective spaces that temporary markets like garage sales and estate sales represent and furthers our analysis of the transformations that occur between buyers, sellers, and the home/market place before them.

The final body chapter of the thesis, “Two Alternative Deaths: Haunted Sales and Self Death” offers two different deaths of homes found outside of the company estate sale model. Split into two sections, the first, “Hauntings of a Strawberry Tea Set,” is a short ethnographic vignette that traces the one family sale I can ever remember attending. I will compare my experiences at this sale as a buyer with the sellers who were family members to my work with the estate sale company. The second portion, “Death of the Self,” is another ethnographic vignette from when I encountered Mary, a 102-year-old woman slowly killing her own home as she anticipates her proximate death. I situate this encounter with other literature on contemporary Western practices of aging and downsizing before death, like Marcoux’s analysis of the “casser maison” ritual in Montreal. These moments are put into larger conversations regarding the burden of things for relatives, and I examine what occurs when a loved one or oneself is themselves involved in the process of sorting a home’s death. A small conclusion book-ends the work with a final consideration of the estate sale as a social site and how it helps us reconsider scholarship related to American culture and death and expand our conversations related to material culture, memory, grief, and the home as a social site.

2

The Death of a Family Home

Introduction

Sometime in our lives, in one form or another, we will all face the untimely deaths of homes. We will be called by social obligation to take part in rituals that leave a home empty. Whether it be through the estate sale or some other rituals or method of de-possession, this process can be incredibly emotional, especially for family members and close friends. This is because in the removal of things, senses of person tend to evaporate with it, as through disappearing through the cracks in walls and floors. In my personal life, I have taken part in the clearing of several homes, but only one of a relative, my great grandmother whom I called Mamaw Stiles. When clearing out Mamaw Stiles' home, the items within it at times made me feel a sense of awe, curiosity, disgust, joy, and fear as I encountered them. As I put my nose into places it probably shouldn't have been, the material contents of the house presented themselves as something for me to explore and learn about, particularly being helpful for learning about certain persons in my family I had not met or did not know well.

To further explore my memory of these two experiences and why they created different types of sentiments, I utilize work by anthropologist Daniel Miller and literary critic Susan

Stewart to discuss some innate features found within everyday material culture; I examine Millers' writing on the artefact and its ways of structuring the unconscious and Stewart's exhaustive work on the souvenir to help situate my particular actions and feelings into larger conversations about consumption, culture, and memorialization. Homes are then considered as social sites used for understanding one's place in their social relationships and within the larger cultural world existing outside of its walls. Using the work of anthropologist Allison Clarke, a discussion of the ideal home and the processes by which occupants strive towards this imaginative goal, like in the activity of decorating, is used to show how homes, assemblages of items ripe with meaning, come as a whole to frame persons. Clarke shows that these items, selected and positioned through a set of negotiations against expectation and desire, also represent outside forces like history, culture, and class, making the home a larger representation of dispositions and mediations one has towards all sorts of greater social systems they are a part of, even if they do not realize the extent of their activity and think of their practices as *just* decorating, as material culture often gets stamped.

Following this general discussion of things, memory, and homes, I use case studies by ethnographers writing about grief in Western societies to place these feelings into larger social contexts and to dive deeper into the deeply emotional responses people can have to material culture in the face of death. Autoethnographic work by the sociologist Margaret Gibson on mourning objects and ethnographic research conducted by Daniel Miller and Fiona Parrott on material culture and loss in London allow for us to once again return to specifics and particulars through case studies of grief and material culture from discussions of homes and objects generally. Finally, I describe Bill Brow's writing on thing theory and Michael Taussig's work with

defacement to examine the invisible structural changes that occur between objects and bodies in the face of a home or person's death, which create these emotional transformations in material culture and affective spaces in the first place.

These works come together to

My First Home Death: Mamaw Stiles' House

When I was about five or six, my family and I started to clear out the home of Mamaw Stiles. Every weekend for three years, especially in the summers, my parents and two siblings would load up in two cars—a beat-up red truck and my mother's old white car—and drive to Harriman, Tennessee, an older town about an hour to the West of us. There, we would meet the rest of the family on my Mother's side to help clean out Mamaw Stiles' house. When we would drive into to the neighborhood, I remembered the blocks being filled with older, paint-chipped homes, ornamented with things like turrets and columns from the turn of the 20th century, something quite different from the suburban neighborhood I called home some-40 miles to the East. Pulling up to the house itself, it blended in quite nicely with those around it—a bit chipped, some dark windows, but nothing obscure or unusual for the street. Behind closed doors, however, was a different story: of the 13-or so rooms in the house, each one was filled to the brim with boxes, newspapers, old clothes, letters, used cans of soup. I remember being able to stand in the doorway of a room, with boxes towering over me to the ceiling. Light would try its hardest to reflect through the film-covered windows, but it would be absorbed by the bits and pieces of life, stacked. And I never will forget the smell—a mixture of decaying boxes,

dust, and stale air. To say it plainly, Mamaw Stiles was a hoarder. She kept *everything*, quite literally, until dementia started to affect her health and living, and my family chose to put her in an assisted living facility.

Having lived through the Great Depression and the rations of WWII, the social conditions of her life, my family thinks, caused transformations in Mamaw Stiles' relationship to material culture and things. While this thesis is not about hoarding and that itself could be its own topic, and I am neither an expert on the topic nor mental health, I will end my discussion of hoarding here. But because of Mamaw Stiles' practices of hoarding, the process of a home's death was much longer and different than what I would considered 'normal,' and for that reason, I feel that the longevity made the experience stick with me. Hoarding also changed the very face of her home and how I understood it as a child, which made me read it as both a place of discovery and fear; in fact, the home didn't feel like a home to me at all, more like an uncanny type of playground, where I could find treasures and monsters. To be honest, though, I only have selective memories of the experience. And, to be more honest, I didn't really know Mamaw Stiles. I had only visited her once or twice in her assisted living; her state and my age meant we never had a conversation with any depth. When we would visit, I remember she would warmly look at me and call me "Trigger," almost but not quite my family nickname of "Tigger." I mostly remember feeling uncomfortable in these situations, but I remember her kind smile. Cleaning out her house, however, offered intimate moments into her life and my family history that, when coupled with a narrative from my Mother, provided insights into Mamaw Stiles' person. The material world my Mamaw had made for herself allowed me to know her in unimaginable ways despite time and her disease.



Mamaw Stiles' house from the outside

For example, Mamaw Stiles collected salt and pepper shakers from her travels. In the kitchen of the house, there was a large rack that had hundreds and hundreds of pairs—pairs of animals, vegetables, fat chefs, monuments, automobiles, and more. I remember sitting in the kitchen and staring at all of the different shapes and colors, labeled with locations and places I never imagined I would visit, stained by years of grease cooking on the stove and the heavy smoke of cigarettes. “Mamaw and Papaw would get in that station wagon of theirs and go everywhere,” my mother told me once. “She got some where ever she went.” All throughout the house were boxes of assorted costume jewelry, hats, and coats for all occasions. I spent hours trying to untangle beads while my parents did the actual work of moving boxes and sorting. I could tell how much color and the intricacy of things had touched her life. Hidden in boxes were vases of all shapes and sizes from her days of running a flower shop—miniature swans, hands, and faces. I remember this large sign that said “STILES’ FLORAL”. I always

imagined it hanging on some busy street and how her shop would look, even though I don't think I had even been in a flower shop at that point. We found in the freezer her furs to keep them fresh and under her bed, the fine silver to keep it from burglars. Besides showing signs of intense anxiety and distress, Mamaw Stiles' practices of storing and the items she chose together offered glimpses of her person.

Most important of all, however, were the family photographs, which told me key details of our family history no one had ever told me about. Objects gave hints and tells about Mamaw Stiles, but photos gave faces and let me see her and relatives as they had once been. I particularly remember looking at photos of my Papaw Billy when he was about my age. His photos were always with another little girl who looked about the same age that I didn't recognize. "Who is that?" I asked my mother one day. "That's Betty Sue," my Mother told me. "She died of an accidental drug overdose when she was real young." And so I encountered about Betty Sue. I learned more of the story later, when I was older and could better handle the family gossip—that she married a wealthy man, moved to the North East away from family and friends, developed a drinking habit in the face of an okay marriage and relatively empty social life, and one day in her mid-thirties, didn't wake up after taking her medication with a few glasses of Sherry. There was a locket I found mixed with some jewelry that had her face in it, and I took it and hid it away from everyone. I remember staring at that photo of her in the locket and trying to imagine what she was like or what her interests were or what my connection to her was. I would wonder what items in the house were hers or what she could have used. Sometimes, I would even try and imagine what she looked like when died, when someone found her body. These pieces of material culture gave me insights into—or, at the

very least, made me wonder about for a brief moment—the lives of Mamaw Stiles, Betty Sue, and my larger family.

Objects as Bridges: Learning Through Death

Through the death of Mamaw Stiles' home, as I hope these bits of autoethnography have shown, these moments of reflection and learning in her absence were made possible through things. But why exactly was that the case? Social analyses of material culture by literary theorists and social scientists alive have convinced me it is because of some innate qualities found within material culture itself. In *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, which was briefly discussed in the first chapter of this work, Daniel Miller writes a chapter concerning the nature of artefacts, which to him basically means objects instilled with social meaning; Miller argues that “[a]n analysis of the artefact must begin with its most obvious characteristic, which is that it exists as a physically concrete form independent of any individual’s mental image of it” (Miller 1987: 98-99). While this is quite a basic observation of items—that they are made of stuff and persist without us thinking of them—he soon adds some bite to his initial statement: “The importance of this physicality of the artefact derives from its ability thereby to act as a bridge, not only between the mental and physical worlds, but also, more unexpectedly, between consciousness and the unconscious” (99). While this is a lot to unpack and think about at once—especially the end part which considers the material world and its influences on cognition and structures of thought itself—let us first stop and consider the idea of material culture acting as a bridge.

Because most items in our everyday experiences are constants and exist as matter outside of our mental control, they have a great ability to be a source of concrete meaning in a sometimes fast-paced and confusing world. Items as representational forms are, thus, difficult to make different or abstract after their initial construction, unlike other expressive ways available to represent oneself in culture like the use of metaphor in language. For example, a black coffee cup with kitties can't exactly grow green with envy on its own without my attributing it that character, unless perhaps I'm under the influence of some hallucinogen or experiencing vertigo. In this respect, without distinct physical or social transformations taking place that change one's perception of a certain object, like death or an item breaking, it is difficult for items to be made separate from their significations that have been created through their specific production, social uses and connotations, and/or personal use histories picked up through an active, lived relationship with that item.

To further my example from before, I know from my experience with the black coffee cup with kitties that it is my roommate Lucy's, and the two kitties are her family pets, Cosmo and Lola. Without this information, it would just be a cup with cute cats on it that I perhaps may have wanted for its precious nature, but now, when I use the cup, I momentarily think of her family and relationship with those cats. We know about a lot of our material culture through specific social relationships, and they are essential to how we perceive things around us. In this sense, items in Mamaw Stiles' house, then, acted as bridges to the past and to persons. In her absence, all that remained to tell her stories were myths from my family and the things she had. Salt shakers and broken beaded necklaces were, thus, more than toys to play with while my parents did the real work; these things did the job of bridging generations, even if only in

tenuous ways, by offering hints and whisper of who she was. Because she had selected, once held, and chosen to keep these particular things, they mattered. Perhaps they were her favorite pieces of jewelry I was playing with, maybe someone gave them to her as a gift, or she could have never worn it at all--it didn't matter, because they were hers, and they persisted in her presence, making meaning for her in some way.

But, material culture is not only a symbol or signification for a greater idea or type of person, as it is often limited to in studies of art, aesthetics, and semiotics (97). Miller suggest that material culture does more than help us connect that which is unseen—like a deceased relative—to the greater, known material world, although this is a definite characteristic of material culture as I have shown in the previous pages. Rather, through an understanding of the material world that we have as individuals developed over time and experience, things offer to us hints and cues that are readable, and these textured hints orient what actions and behaviors are appropriate towards spaces and people. Miller develops this aspect of material culture further by discussing the idea and purpose of a frame in relation to art. He tells us that a good frame is one that is anonymous, modest, and absorbed by the viewer without consideration, which hides its true significance: in its presence, the frame itself tells our eyes where to look and makes us see a work as a piece of art (100-101). Without the frame, we may instead see a piece of art as an everyday thing, unworthy of the appreciation and moments of consideration that art as a category requires. As a frame does, Miller tells us, “one object is able to control the nature of our consciousness, making it appropriate to the context within which the object is working” (101). Everyday things help to bridge the conscious and unconscious in their sneaky ability to fade into the background through their appropriateness in their contexts, yet still

structure our everyday interactions and experiences by helping us orient ourselves in the spaces we encounter.

For example, a room in a house containing a table of a certain size and height, usually with at least four chairs around it, has specific cultural and historical significations that have come to mean something for participants in American culture, that it is a dining room. Our ideas of dining rooms, an essential part of the 'proper' American home, have been constructed from every experience until that point with homes with have—whether it be from visiting homes or our experiences with them in media and pop culture. How we interact with the space and people in it is determined by that built-up understanding of space material culture that helps define space for us as soon as we enter somewhere either new or familiar in automatic ways. At the dinner table, conversations during a meal are mediated by what is deemed culturally appropriate 'dinner table' conversation, which as a space, again, is defined by the physical configuration of table and chairs itself. When one speaks in a way that is considered unsuitable for the table, they are often reminded "We're at the dinner table!" Perhaps, however, if the chairs and tables were elevated to a higher level and the personal space at the table were limited, the material space would be read more as a bar, and these types of conversations would not be uncouth and even warranted for necessary merry-making amongst peers and friends.

While other information is definitely used to help prepare us for entering certain spaces and orienting our expectations like language or memory, we never know what a space looks like or feels like until we enter it ourselves and experience it physically, and the material world does this hard work for us—creating senses of place and orienting us--by fading into the background.

The most important feature for most everyday items like a dining room or living room set is that it cohesively fits within a space, not drawing our attention towards it necessarily (102). When things are, however, brought to the forefront in one's mind when in a home as they do from time to time, these moments usually lead one to reflect on the good sensibilities of the object's owner after consideration of the item(s) in question. The items themselves are meant to reflect and embellish senses of their owner and their tastes, not taking up too much space and overshadowing the true 'piece of art,' the person (101).

Objects as Frames: The American Home as a Frame

From Miller's discussion of the frame, I feel that the home is one of the most essential frames for an individual or family in American social life. While clothing of a person may represent more contemporary and updated senses of taste or style because of the ease at which one can transform themselves through costume, the home is a cache of one's material experience in this world—representing years of trying to make sense of one's place, one's social experiences, and where one would like to be in the future. It is a site of aspiration and a space with which to imagine the extent that one's identity and person can reach. In her essay "The Aesthetics of Social Aspiration," Alison J. Clarke, a former student of Miller, examines British home ownership in the 1990s as a site of aspiration and a place for examining the 'ideal'. Clarke interviews north Londoners living in government assisted housing about their decorating practices in relation to their social positions and their dynamic relationships to the state to see how they mediate senses of a 'proper' home against their individual desires, aspirations, and

limitations (Clarke 2001: 23-25). Each of the three case studies that she highlights in her essay emphasize how the material culture of these home owners went beyond representing their identities and taste and rather reflected larger understandings and projections of their relationships to the greater social world (29).

In this essay, Clarke interestingly considers home not to be an act of individual expression but to be a process, one in which “past and future trajectories . . . are negotiated through fantasy and action, projection and interiorization” (25). The home is a process in that it is constantly under negotiation through its use life as the family goes through different life cycles. For instance, when a couple first has a child, the material contents of their home changes significantly. The same happens when that child goes to college, and there is suddenly so much space within the homes. While individuals decorate at various times for different social reasons, and some homes are decorated every year while some have not changed that much in twenty, it is through decoration that “members of households attempt to invert, reinvent or perpetuate their material worlds” (26). Changes in social conditions often require changes in material conditions, as has been briefly shown above.

In the act of decorating, one is required to consider their material spaces and draw upon or perhaps purposefully work against certain cultural logics related to homes, developed over time and history (26-27). Decorating is a moment of drawing on cultural logics that exist within our experiences of home built from media and our own lives. We create our sense of home against this idealized picture of home, which would give us the optimum pleasure for how it looks and feels, requiring a great deal of imagining. These ideal homes are used as both measures against which we hold ourselves and as models for our decorating techniques and

other activities in the home. Through these complex negotiations of expectations and self, homes themselves are created. Decorating, thus, “act as conceptual and value-laden configurations informing or undermining everyday household decisions,” and these decisions are meant to reinforce the concepts of home—like being a good mother or having the perfect bachelor pad--that drive them in the first place (26). This, again, shows the nature of the artefact in influencing the ways we inhabit spaces, as Miller found in his research of things. But the ideal home is also based upon what others may think of us: “far from being a site of crude emulation, the house itself *actually* becomes the ‘others’ in that the home becomes something to live up to and show off, designed with what spectators or visitors might have in mind (42). The home is above all else a place where these conversations and larger social ideas are played out through decorating and imagining ideal social worlds and relationships.

As a collection of goods, Mamaw Stiles’ things came together to act as a frame that together represented her understanding of the world and the place of certain social relationships in her life. These were not mere representations of herself, identity, and tastes but pieces of evidence regarding how Mamaw Stiles socially interacted with her home and world and thought were ‘ideal’. Not just her things, but her structures of habit and being for years, including the eventual manifestation of hoarding tendencies. How she understood the idea of home and constructed it materially was mediated by these understandings of home built through her life, coupled with her personal desires and anxieties. It is impossible to say exactly why she chose certain items or exhibited these hoarding tendencies without asking her--we could attribute it a number of things, to the histories of living through WWII and the Great Depression, grief attached to the death of a child and husband, and the anxieties and

expectations put on her as a mother—but that discussion does not really matter for this work. What does matter is that the material culture in its physically, standing in the background for essential and banal life-time experiences, is what gave them their significance in the face of death and allowed for me to learn. Otherwise, they would have been ignored and faded into the background. Perhaps not in Mamaw Stiles' case because of her hoarding—I never saw her house as a 'real' house, in fact. —but the items and home did change in meaning because of the death of Mamaw Stiles and the home itself, which made these items and places storied and given meaning. It made them sacred and extra-ordinary.

Objects and Narrative: The Amplification of Miller's 'Bridge'

The previous two sections have examined homes and objects for their larger implications and meanings using anthropological literature, exposing the often neglected yet significant characteristics of material culture in memorialization in relation to my personal narrative. Above all, I feel the two come together to show how material culture has some innate and essential abilities to construction ideas of persons and their actual orientations. These offered profound ideas of my Mamaw Stiles who I did not really get to know. When coupled with language, however, these specific items and rooms within Mamaw Stiles' house were amplified as bridges when narrative was introduced to it by my Mother or another family member. A specific item or assemblage of items has the funny ability to be even further transformed when narrative is introduced to that object or space. Narrative helps to strengthen and reinforce an object's social ability to bridge meaning. Literary critic Susan Stewart's work

On Longing (1993) is helpful when considering the importance of the story in our relationship to things and its role in the preservation of memory; in particular, I find her writing on the souvenir as a category of object used to tie down and differentiate between past experiences in physical form to be very provocative. While the work is about objects endowed with meaning from specific events from things like travels or important rites of passage, based on narratives and literary accounts, everyday items transform in meaning through the death of a home for the relatives of the deceased in ways that mirror the souvenir.

Stewart writes that the souvenir is something material created when an experience is rare, not repeatable, and one feels to have a material reminder to stand as a record or testament to their having been in a place or having experience something. Souvenirs are used to report on something, to put it vaguely, that has escaped us, usually because of the nature of time, and it “thereby exist only through the invention of narrative” (Stewart 1993: 135). Basically, by talking about that item and sharing the experience, whatever it is, with others. Taking the item from its location to a remember in a way is scandalous in that only through its removal from its original place—a special event one wants to remember—can it acquire value. Through removal, a small act of destruction, a return to that space, the essential function of this souvenir, becomes available (135). The presence of the souvenir itself in its new context, perhaps sitting on a shelf or desk, suggest this separation, removal, and distance from times, persons, and places of the past, something we can never go back to and something that will never be again.

Because it is always something removed from its original context, this narrative attached to the souvenir is, therefore, always essentially incomplete and will never be anything

close to the experience or representation it is trying to approximate: it is always a 'second hand' experience based on the perspective from the specific narrator. Further, that representation itself is based upon specific symbols in one's memory, only a small smidge of a representation of an actual event that took place, a 'sample' as Stewart calls it (135-136). And this sample itself becomes lost in an entire set of references that become more largely abstracted symbols when one attempts to pin down specific memories as time passes. Stewart gives the example of a ribbon from a corsage used to remember a certain spring formal dance. The ribbon itself stands as a referent, kept for the experience of the dance, steeped in imagery of the larger event: "the gown, the dance, the particular occasion, the particular spring, all springs, romance, etc." (136). As shown in this example, our experiences smudge together over time, never able to fully recuperate the experience or longing as we forget and our present, distant actually begins to influence our understandings of the past. This is pretty obvious: the object will never be the experience nor the person it is representing. It can't be. We cannot turn back time.

Yet, we still collect souvenirs and relicts to remember and to authenticate, and the item as a souvenir will not and cannot exist without the "supplementary narrative discourse that both attaches it to its origins and creates a myth" (136). This narrative, a personal relationship of some sort to the object and experience it represents, is therefore not about the object but more about the possessor or possessed itself. The souvenir is always about its owner and the owner's narrative, authenticating the experience of the past, and this narrative retrieves the past and makes use of itself in the present for the owner at any time that they wish to

reminisce on days gone. It is the past in the presence, but never completed, or else the item would not be necessary at all.

Above all else, Stewart teaches us that the narrative is essential to the souvenir and without it, the souvenir is a meaningless, everyday object that slips into the background as a normative type of good. But what happens in the face of death? Stewart talks briefly about death souvenirs and how they are at their very core different from traditional souvenirs. She says that souvenirs of death are “at the same time the most intensely *potential* souvenirs and the most potent antisouvenirs. They mark the horrible transformation of meaning into materiality more than they mark, as souvenirs do, the transformation of materiality into meaning” (140, original emphasis). Souvenirs of past, particular experiences are meant to reminisce and recapture that specific moment, so we can recapture it and remember it as something different from the everyday through narrative; souvenirs of the dead, on the other hand, are made meaningful only through the death of the meaningful. They are not created in the material world to remember something grand and meaningful but are the mark of the end of something grand and meaningful. These types of items are the zenith of the potential distance and desire souvenirs can create. It is in this way that everyday items, like the contents of Mamaw Stiles’ house, are made into souvenirs. They were given texture only in absence.

Potential, a work Stewart herself noted attention to in her work, is something that interests me quite a bit and what I think is important to note in these conversations of significance; material culture has the potential to do all of these things, but specific items do not always act in the same way for everyone. Everyone is different, yet we react to material culture in similar ways that are patterned. But still, not everyone notices the same type of

things when they encounter spaces, even spaces of the dead that pick up heightened significance. While literary theorists are good at attuning themselves to sensibilities through their number of examples from the written past as Stewart has brilliantly shown, social scientists have the benefit of being able to directly interact with their 'data', whether that be field participants or themselves. A study of something like the potential of objects or practices towards them in social life, I think, requires distinct social sites and various responses to a set of research questions to explore it, which may be better attuned to social sciences like sociology or anthropology.

One particular sociologist to study the questions of everyday objects their transitory effects through death is Margaret Gibson. Her short article "Melancholy objects" (2004) uses interviews, biographical texts, and psychoanalysis to examine how objects are used in the memorialization of the deceased and what happens to those objects as death becomes more real for those mourning (Gibson 2004: 285). From her analysis, she tells us that objects function as essential "metaphorical and metonymic traces of corporeal absence" (285). These melancholy objects, further, act as transitional objects to help people mediate death. Gibson explains that the reason mourning objects are so essential is because they overcome the nonvisibility and non-contact of death. She writes that "through experiencing aging, and witnessing death, human beings come to know the metamorphosis of their own and other's material existence (291). This nonvisibility creates an absence, and that absence is felt through the in-action of things in a home. Things are no longer used as they once were: Grandma doesn't sit in her chair by the couch, rocking and knitting small blankets to donate to the local animal shelter anymore; instead, the chair sits empty, motionless, the needles resting in their

basket inactive, no longer serving their function or existing in the same ways they once did socially. Objects are now a constant reminder of the vast loss, even those of the everyday: “Through death, the most mundane objects can rise in symbolic, emotional and mnemonic value sometimes outweighing all other measures of value—particularly the economic” (292).

These objects have attached to them what Gibson labels a “ghostly reverberation,” which she uses to talk about this enduring feeling of certain objects (293). Gibson moves our conversation towards an atmospheric change, which is different from our discussion of the nature of objects. Although she doesn’t define the term, I feel that by it she means a type of shift within relationships to things or spaces in the face of death. The home being the central location of most objects in one’s life makes the home an emotionally charged space for families of the dead. They feel a type of ghostly reverberation when first interacting with entire spaces and collections of objects in that home. This reverberation, naturally at first, is very sharp. Gibson writes: “Death vacates as well as raises the meaning and value of objects. When family members sort through the material possessions of a deceased loved one, objects might appear abandoned, even unhomey. Keeping objects is a way of reclaiming and rehousing (making homely) the remains of a life now gone” (296-7). Objects, again, lose their essential meaning through death because their owners can no longer use them. Family members and close friends, having first choice, get to then select these one or two mortuary objects used to remember those who have died. These items, thus, change meaning as melancholy objects, transforming essentially in their minds.

This type of understanding of mourning objects is similar to what Stewart told us about the souvenir of the deceased do at their core, but Gibson is able to place these categories of

things into their larger social processes of 'dealing' with death, showing how these seemingly random goods transform in value through death's soiling hands. In her article, Gibson goes on to tell us that these same items that once held value through death can lose their significance once again. She notes that ". . . as time passes the temporal and corporeal distance between the living and the dead widens and the haunting effects of grief diminish" (286). As grief becomes acceptable, people can finally let go of some of the boxes they have been holding on to that they took from the initial stages of a home's death. Their houses can go back to their proper shapes, instead of being *mélanges* of two houses in limbo. The unfathomability of someone's death gets easier, simply, as time goes on and the memory becomes more distance, and the final sorting can take place. This process of material divestment from social relationships is not the highlight of the article, but Gibson throughout notes that process is essential to our understanding of mourning objects.

In their study of twenty-seven North London homes, anthropologists Daniel Miller and Fiona Perrott center the process of divestment from material culture when dealing with loss and grief in social relationships. Miller and Parrott's essay, "Loss and material culture in South London" (2001), argues that the divestment from objects is central to ways in which "contemporary people" separate from their relationships. (Miller and Parrott 2001: 502) When we inherit things from a deceased relative or are left with relics of a past relationship, we divest through those items over time as that loss becomes more comfortable. Sometimes—like in the case of a failed relationship—we get rid of things rapidly, like in a burning, to forget and at times even go back to a state before the relationship, removing not only things owned by the other partner or gifts received from them but traces and influences in their social life and

behaviors. Maybe a partner did not like when one dressed a certain way, for instance, and that person begins to dress how they did before they met their ex-partner. Miller and Perrott note from their field work that people have told them of dramatically changing things like clothes, having certain types of decoration, and listening to music they did before the relationship to move beyond the pain and suffering found in that loss and by the nature of material culture, in those items (507-511; 515).

In the case of death, however, things often take a bit longer. We start with the small things, giving away some of the clothes of the deceased. Then we move on and feel we can give away things that were more meaningful and contained more memory, which could be anything, as this specific affective attachment to things is individualistic yet universal in a general nature. Miller and Parrott note that we can't control when death takes someone, but ". . . we can control the way we separate from the material objects that were associated with the dead. Through this material substitution we can allow that process to take time and be carried out in such a way that ultimately we feel we have been better able to come to terms with the death itself" (509). Through time, acceptance of death comes as people de-invest from objects and invest in certain ones for memory purposes. Miller and Parrott characterize this gradual de-investment or investment in certain, specific items through a process called 'the economy of relationships' (511). People receive material culture through their relationships in the forms of gifts, mementos, or relics, and because there are so many relationships in one's life, ". . . significant relationship, whether to persons or periods and events of [the] past, ultimately become reduced to just one or two objects as other mementoes make way for other relationships" (513). We only have so much physical space in our homes or things begin to get

chaotic, even if our hearts remain endlessly open for connection and relationship building. In this concentration of memory into a few things, we are able to read those items as many referents and memories, as Stewart showed us with the souvenir and her example of the ribbon. A person's clothing tastes, the perfume they wore, the types of foods they liked to cook, a specific moment or series of moments one had with them, a sense of a space, etc. can all be reduced to a few things because of their physicality and work in recording memory.

Objects and Death: Transformations of Objects

This chapter has thus far talked about the transformations of objects in the face of death and what these specific changes were in relation to my person narrative. These items became artefacts endowed with meaning through their persistence through time, their physicality, their sheer having touched a person or place that once was and is now gone, or in the process of being gone, which allowed them to bridge time and distance itself by shouting senses of persons and times of the past to those nearby. These assemblages of items, representing a home itself, became more than everyday home goods, because they themselves as items structured a life and were representative of dispositions towards and ideas about the world, as well as representing in small ways social relationships: they were items placed with intention that had specific 'biographies' (see Appadurai 1984). When narrative was introduced by a family member, items leaped further at me because the bridge was reinforced through more context and details with which to imagine. These representations are faulty at best, as

Stewart exemplified through her exhaustive discussion of the souvenir, but their existence attends to the significant nature of material culture in memorialization and social relationships.

The chapter has also talked briefly about the centrality of process in our relationship to things, specifically focusing on time and how it helps settle wounds of grief. This distancing is necessary because otherwise, we would never get on with our lives, and our homes would forever be filled with boxes of things like old magazine and toothbrushes that, while significant for a moment, become quite meaningless a moment later when the loss is more real. This is a subtle blessing and kindness time offers us, comforting our grief. But, thus far, it has not answered an essential piece to the puzzle: what it is about death *itself* that does this to the object? The conversation created between the previous scholars in this paper show that death changes the manner in which people categorization and use objects, but they do not discuss what it is about death that violently rips objects from their social fibers. Gibson gives us the idea of 'ghostly reverberations' telling us what death does to objects, but she does not go into a discussion of how death as a social force itself has the potential to change people's understanding of things. Thinking of this question, the work Michael Taussig's does with death in his book *Defacement* (1999) interestingly pairs well with Gibson, my personal narrative, and the other theorists of materiality. His work deals with public secrets and how they become exposed through the defacement of the sacred. Taussig employs his rich, ethnographic eye to give a characterization of defacement and its affects, rather than define it empirically, and for that reason, it is a bit difficult to synthesize the work. But the patches of understanding I got from Taussig's words and ethnographic writings helped me understand death and objects in profound ways.

He starts his book with a powerful assertion: "When the human body, a nation's flag, money, or a public statue is defaced, a strange surplus of negative energy is likely to be aroused from within the defaced thing itself. It is now in a state of desecration, the closest many of us are going to get to the sacred in this modern world" (Taussig 1999: 1). In its desecration, we take notice of something and it becomes dramatically changed and transformed. Influenced by the critical theory of Walter Benjamin, Taussig notes that "the revelation [of defacement] shall do justice to the secret." Through this destruction, the objects "achieve its most brilliant degree of illumination" (2). When someone dies and this uncomfortability is felt, the wide lacuna that has formed is understood through material things and homes, and these items, essential parts of people, become symbols and representations of who that person was and what they represented. This is defacement. When that loss is noticed, what the person truly was and how they interacted and functioned in one's life is realized in a "brilliant degree of illumination." The person, then, has been elevated to sacred as well as their things, apotheosized (elevated to the sacred) in some way.

If we learn from Miller, Perrott, Gibson, and Stewart that objects are essential parts of people and their experiences and mediations, and Taussig tells us that objects are made sacred through their defacement, people, by extension, are too. Things, then, become changed through the process of defacement. Developing Taussig's idea of defacement more, Taussig describes the process of defacement like Enlightenment; he says that . . .

It brings insides outside, unearthing knowledge, and revealing mystery. As it does this, however, as it spoliates and tears at tegument, it may also animate the thing defaced and the mystery revealed may become more mysterious, indicating the curious magic upon which Enlightenment, in its elimination of magic, depends (3-4).

Objects of the dead then become moments to mediate and reckon with ideas of death, spirituality, religion, and the afterlife. Objects stand as a reminder of the absence, the negative, that they are not there. Surely, they must exist somewhere, right? People begin to think and wonder about their own place in relationship to death and dying. The death of their loved one becomes an abstraction of death and mourning in general, which Margaret Gibson also tells us can sometimes occur with melancholy objects. She writes that “. . . the melancholy object signifies the memory of mourning and as such it is the memorialized object of mourning (Gibson 2004: 289). In the same way, these items of death become memorialized objects of death. The act of defacement by marking items of the deceased as absent, negative spaces that are changed and defiled, thus, creates the ghostly reverberations Margaret Gibson talks about. Defacement paired with material culture studies, thus, helps us understand how the defiled, defaced, and sacred items owned by someone's dead can strike people and cause them to feel strange feelings toward objects owned by that person, sometimes causing family members to mediate on death in general. Their absence is signaled through their former material life, and that absence causes deep feeling of loss and unearths the realization and extent to which that person mattered in one's life.

We learn from Taussig that defacement breaks the everyday social nature of objects. In an objects or homes defacement, then, what do they become? What are they next, besides referents of individuals, death, and/or mourning? How are we to categorize these objects? Taussig writes that defacement of certain things is the closest we come to the sacred, so we could say that these items become sacred. But that would be an incorrect usage, as we have learned from our discussion of material theory that individuals slowly deinvest through an

economy of relationships and confine their memory of an individual to one or two essential objects. Things that are sacred do not have this short-lived nature. The work of Bill Brown (2001) on thing theory helps us to image what occurs when everyday things are broken or revealed to be 'things,' which I think is more useful for understanding everyday acts of defacement, versus grandiose acts that Taussig studies like defacement of public statues. Like defacement, thingness is a bit difficult to describe, but most of us know the feeling when we encounter it. Brown describes 'thingness' as "[O]ccasions outside the scene of phenomenological attention that nonetheless teach you that you're "caught up in things" and that the "body is a thing among things." They are occasions of contingency-the chance interruption-that disclose a physicality of things" (Brown 2001: 4). Brown tells us that this type of thingness is found when things stop to work for us. When something breaks and causes a problem with perceived futures or imagined plans, like your car breaks down or you break a favorite dish, are you confronted with that object's reality and social function within your life.

But "thingness" is not about the object or materiality at all, but about a particular subject-object relationship that forms when something occurs outside of the normal, causing us to be struck by that things "thingness" (4). You are reminded of what that thing does for you that normally is taken for granted and fades into the everyday. Miller especially and other material theorists show us that material relationships are essential and inseparable from social relationships. If 'thingness' is made aware through something's breaking, and human beings are essential to our understanding of objects in social contexts, do things of the dead, then, become broken and, thus, things themselves? I think so. Through the death of an individual, and as items become defaced, I think they transform from objects to things. They become

broken, defiled, transformed, and endowed with death. Through their association with death, things change form, becoming defaced things endowed with memories of the deceased. Without death, these items would remain in their action-based, personal use life (everyday objects); they stay in the background and are just stuff. But with death, we have learned that even the simplest of objects become relics and sacred. After a while though, they lose that special spark, and become divested to have new lives. Thingness helps us to think about ideas of sacredness in the everyday and how death stops essential functions of objects, while defacement allows us to conceptualize the real process by which things become seen and, in the works of Taussig, Enlightened.

Conclusion

This chapter shows the significant transformations possible for material items in the face of death. Using my autoethnographic memories of cleaning out my Mamaw Stiles' home and adding sustenance to my feelings and thoughts with case studies and theories from a wide variety of scholars who study materiality and affective transformations generally, I have attempted to characterize some innate characteristics of material culture in American culture. From Miller, we begin to understand the significance of objects standing in the background, helping to orient our daily experiences, understanding of place, and memories through their sheer physicality. Because they were in this place and 'saw' the memories we experienced or the experiences of someone else, they are significant; Miller and the work of Clarke, his student, also takes the physicality of things to another level with their structuralist analysis of

material culture, stressing its importance in structuring culture and society itself as we know it. Above all else, we learn from Miller and Clarke that items act as metaphorical bridges, bridging both our memories and the conscious and unconscious work through items abilities to guide our interactions in the everyday without us directly thinking about them.

With Stewart, we take memory work deeper, thinking of the importance of narrative as couple with objects. Stewart's understanding of the souvenir, a particular type of object used to remember experiences of the past that can never be again, is fruitful for understanding how everyday good pick up texture through their association with death. Death can be seen as a type of event in social life that marks dramatic changes for those close to the deceased, and souvenirs of these individuals and places dying are common in American and Western cultures with mass consumption as one of their characteristics, as Miller and Perrot show in their analysis of London homes. Margaret Gibson's work on mourning objects and particularly the "ghostly reverberations" they pick up in the face of death helps add nuance to Miller and Perrot's more general study of consumption, mourning, and the economy of relationships we go through to 'adjust' to mass losses. Finally, with the help of literary critic Bill Brown and his 'thing' theory and anthropologist Michael Taussig's writing on defacement, I think more deeply about the structural processes that happen within cultural understandings of things as they are "broken" or "defiled," attempting to show processual what occurs instead of the emotional responses or behaviors to deaths of homes and peoples.

From these theorists and ethnographers, I hope to have shown a more dynamic understanding of American relationships to everyday things that become meaningful through social transformations like death. This characterization I felt was essential to describe before

the estate sale is considered as a ritual in the next chapter, so that the significances of what occurs at these sales in relation to objects—particularly the imaginative narrative work by shoppers with no social connections or knowledge of former owners—can be seen as something truly extraordinary, because these comments really should not occur at all without close ties to a person or a superficial familial bond of some type like those found in family heirloom. At the very least, the comments made would be made privately in one's head, not shared publicly to strangers, especially to the former owners themselves, in spaces like homes.

3

Estate Sale as Ritual:

Rituals of the Object-Obsessed

Introduction: Strangers Seeing Things “Dance”?

The estate sale as a social site is a crafted stage where items themselves perform and can be said to ‘dance’ for both attendees of the sale and its organizers, attempting to beguile strangers into taking them home to be loved and cared for until they are either sold again, donated, or tragically broken. Individuals who look through a home’s former contents—either organizing it for a sale or browsing for purchasing—are struck by these dancing items because of what these dances themselves evoke: These dances are specific and personal memories that have the potential to come to one’s mind as they see certain items they have once known intimately. Not that specific item, *per se*, because that item is not theirs. But, because commodities are multiple by their nature, having innumerable replicas throughout the world, finding a copy of something one interacted with is almost the same feeling as finding that same item hidden under one’s bed or in their closet, as though they are encountering it in the intimate spaces of their own homes. Similarly, at the estate sale, visitors to homes pick up on the collections of items there as being the contents of some person’s home, owned by *someone*

who, while corporally absent, is present in a way through their goods. This 'dancing' allows for people to think more broadly about their relationships to goods, individuals, and to larger social phenomena, like death, that cause homes to be emptied like this in the first place.

The idea of the dancing things, again, comes from none other than the work of Karl Marx, as discussed in the Introduction to this work. As a reminder, in my understanding of his use of the adjective, Marx did not see tables or commodities dance on their own accord. By 'dancing', Marx instead was referring to the diverse symbols and images objects pick up through their social and historical uses. The concept of dancing is very similar to the metaphor of bridges that we get from Miller's metaphor and his writing on the physicality of things. Through the discussion of items as bridges in the previous chapter and the other material culture scholars who helped expand that metaphor, it is clear that objects most certainly, at the very least, dance for those who interact with them. We learn from our discussion that items, besides their use as pragmatic tools, are essentially social tools as well. These bridges, tools of memory, should arguably only be accessible to those intimately connected to that specific object by past experience or personal relationships, even if it is the most tenuous of bridges like those found in a family heirloom owned by someone hundreds of years ago that, for generations, has been nameless and faceless yet still give meaning.

At the estate sale, however, guests who are there to pick up cheap goods are sometimes momentarily struck by things in ways they normally would not be at, let's say, someone's home they are visiting. These moments of reflection and contemplation allow for temporary personal connections to form with objects and for further, imaginative exploration by attendees about those who formerly owned all of this stuff and lived in this place they are

inhabiting. Those at the sale see the objects dance, and subtle bridges form between themselves and former owners of these things, although not as strong as, say, a former family member. How is this so? How do strangers see objects dance? When estate sales are considered as a new type of ritual in American culture and studied as such, the way material culture influences our construction of memory, dispositions, and social relationships as explored in the last chapter are tested and stretched to their limits as strangers unexpectedly find meaning in a field of objects they have never actually had a relationship with.

This chapter takes us deeper into the practices of an estate sale company in East Tennessee, Five Continents Estate Sales (referred to here as ‘the Company’), to examine the ways that participants in their estate sales interacted with the material remains of homes as larger steps in a ritual process geared at leaving a home empty. In the Summer of 2018, I spent the month of August conducting field work with the Company in East Tennessee as they met with clients, cleaned homes, priced goods, and hosted sales. During this research stint, I was a pseudo-employee helping with the practices of setting up various sales, like sorting through goods, moving boxes and larger pieces of furniture, and keeping areas tidy during sales. While those working with me did quite more work than I did—as I often jumped from room to room in homes to check on all employees and their tasks during a day—these opportunities allowed for me to partially embody the practices of estate sale workers to see what it felt like to go through literal stranger’s things and homes. These close proximities and working conditions also allowed for me to interview my co-workers to understand their sentiments and thoughts as they worked. Watching this process was incredibly important for me, as I was able to pick up on subtle comments regarding their relationships to things as items were brought to the forefront

of their mind in the act of sorting. These moments are used to talk about how employees—constantly involved in the processes of a home’s death—situate what they are doing within their conceptions of the larger social world. Throughout, there is discussion about some practices and bureaucratic procedures of setting up a home for sale that show industry awareness of homes as emotional spaces and their deaths as emotion processes, without naming those practices as a result of trying to control emotional perceptions of space and the emotions of clients.

During this research, I was also able to interact with buyers in the position of an employee as they shopped. As a habitual estate sale shopper myself, most often I am focused on goods and exploring a space when I attend sales in my leisure time, not focusing on the behaviors or conversations of other shoppers. By being present through several sales from start to finish during my research, I could observe behaviors of shoppers and eavesdrop on certain conversations to see how buyers were interpreting objects and a space; through these moments, I saw the dynamic changes that take place in people’s perceptions of homes as they became emptied throughout a weekend sale. I also conducted some small informal interviews as I met shoppers. Most of them started when someone would ask me “Why do you have a notepad and why are you writing so much?” The insights I got from these happenings help me in this chapter to reconstruct the atmosphere of estate sale buyers as a comfortable, ritual place to think about the past, larger social relationships like family, and think of abstract and uncomfortable concepts such as death. These conversations are by no means direct or deep and often take the form of informal chit-chat while one shops, something to pass the time. Regardless of the depth of comments or observations said by attendees, the fact that they exist

and were uttered shows that these items have that potential for wildly different transformations in the minds of both those who consider them for merely a moment and those who eventually take them home to use for years.

These transformations that take place at the estate sale for a wide variety of participants would not be possible in the same ways, I argue, if they were simply visiting the home of a friend or even a stranger because of appropriate behaviors we have in a stranger's home, like not touching or going through things without permission. Items are not examined for their worth or potential when visiting someone's home as a guest. Estate sales, temporary home market places, allow homes to be spaces of memory-play and imagining for those who never even knew the owners; the ability to buy everything you touch reverses our normal social behaviors towards homes and allows for them to pick up more meaning for strangers. The transformations that take place at the estate sale in perceptions of objects, then, are the effect of material cultures innate processes and the complex nature of the estate sale as a ritual itself as it brings together conflicting symbols of home and market. Participants have to mediate ideas of someone else's home, their own self and relationships to home, and larger social ideas the home represents as they shop. To explore the estate sale as a ritual, I use Barbara Myerhoff's amazing work on new rituals and nonce rituals in urban populations to 'qualify' the estate sale as a ritual.

Some Notes on Ritual: Barbara Myerhoff's "Nonce" Rituals and the Estate Sale

The work of the late Barbara Myerhoff and her insights into the rituals of urban, elderly American Jews transformed the way American anthropologists and scholars of ritual around the world thought about secular rituals, urban rituals, and "new" rituals. As a student of ritual, her work, some of it reaching nearly forty years old, still offers some of the best readings of ritual and their largely performative nature that I have encountered to date. Myerhoff, influenced particularly by the structural anthropology of Victor Turner, was one of the first major anthropologists to give their own cultures the same consideration as a site of field work and analysis as they would cultures distinct from their own. Myerhoff, an American Jew, studied those she would eventually become, elderly American Jews. Through her deeply personal research, Myerhoff offers us insights into the precarious lives of lonely individuals who, through a Jewish community center, attempt to make meaning of their uneventful lives through things like Yiddish History classes, community events, and crafted rituals. In this chapter, Myerhoff's work is used in particular for its impactful insights into the nature of ritual and its use as a model for analyzing and writing about ritual.

In her essay "We Don't Wrap Herring in a Printed Page" (1977), Myerhoff impactfully describes a ritual she experienced in its first construction during her field work at the elderly Jewish center, a Graduation-Siyum. The ritual blended together elements of the American Graduation and the Jewish *siyum*, a period of untimed, unspecified religious study in Judaism to make an emotionally transformative ritual for its participants, aging Jews finishing a Yiddish History course. From this experience and her other studies of ritual with the Huichol Indians

and their peyote hunts, Myerhoff tells us impactful statements about ritual in general. She begins with a definition, stating that a ritual is “an act or actions intentionally conducted by a group of people employing one or more symbols in a repetitive, formal, precise, highly stylized fashion” (Myerhoff 1977: 129). In their use of various sensorial and playful images, along with movements, rhythms, smells, tastes, etc., ritual first influences the body through the senses in unconscious ways. We are engaged by these forces when we enter a ritual space and begin to participate. By being oriented in certain actions through these playful images that guide our experience in rituals, Myerhoff suggests we come to certain emotional conclusions and feelings in ritual spaces through being engaged in the ritual through the body: in ritual space, Myerhoff writes “behaviors precede emotions in the participants” (129).

Through her analysis, we are also told rituals are an assertion about a small portion of reality that is formed using paradoxical symbols that have been brought together by some party to make a larger point about the greater world and how it actually is (129). Myerhoff tells us that this stylization of ritual is essential in order to persuade participants to take part in it and take whatever assertions the ritual makes as a valid representation of the world. Being convinced is the key to a ritual's success and for participants to become transformed by the encounter. These theatrical and sensuous aspects of ritual are what help persuade us. The goal of the person in charge of the ritual, who Myerhoff calls a “master-of-ceremony,” is to keep up the ritual drama by making it convincing through the use of stylized symbols. The masters-of-ceremony's job is to persuade participants that the way the ritual presents the world is how the world actually is outside of the ritual (130). For that to happen, these symbols have to be ‘read’ and understood by those attending the ritual, so they can realize what the ritual is asserting

and find ways to participate meaningfully. Whatever a ritual may claim about the world, however, Myerhoff tells us is a fiction because rituals are themselves made-up social dramas, and the symbols within them are at their very core contradictory. These contradictions at their core can never be erased or overcome, even if the ritual claims it has transgressed those differences through its display of drama (130).

On nonce rituals, a common form or ritual “in Western, urban, mobile societies” Myerhoff defines them as a “complex ceremony, part of which are sacred and parts secular, parts unique improvisations (open) and parts stable, recurrent and fixed (closed)” (131). They rely on the creative interpretation of spectators and participants to make sense of them (open), while relying on some heavily structured ritual elements to still guide participants and tell them what to do (closed) (131). These types of rituals are characteristic of urban places with populations that have little social or historic similarities that would bind them into distinct cultural groups. Individuals in these rituals are usually strangers and have little social ties to one another. Because there is not a plethora of cultural and historic symbols to draw on, in the crafting of a new ritual in these locales, it is difficult for masters-of-ceremonies to construct a ritual using specific symbols that everyone can draw meaning from and find ways to participate in. To overcome these obstacles, masters-of-ceremonies must use symbols that “refer to the most basic common denominators of belief and experience—usually general, shallow and abstract, and little able to arouse deep emotion or profound conviction” (131).

These basic symbols are made complex, however, through their uncanny and paradoxical juxtaposition in ritual, which give them more meaning and signification: “A common solution found in many rituals in secular situations [to persuade participants and

witnesses] involves sequencing—of two kinds, sacred/secular, and open/closed” (131). By bringing the sacred and secular together, rituals are able to add authority to their claims as “particulars are painted with the colors of the sacred. . . borrowing the latter’s sense of specialness and significance” (132). The merging of sacred and secular takes the place of complex, collective symbols that usually hold a ritual together. In the case of fusing open/closed elements in a ritual, those that are closed provide important rigid structures that give the ritual a format and sequence, while the open portions allow for “participants to establish their individual emotions, identities, motives and needs and allow the ritual masters-of-ceremony to convey the specific, idiosyncratic messages which are unique to the occasion at hand [to those participants]” (132). During these open moments, coordination and communication occur between participants for “those involved to be certain that they are in the same play” and that they are ‘correctly’ interpreting the ritual and know what is happening (132). To help further guide participants, some rituals use a type of guiding metaphor that has many referents to try and impact as many people as possible. This is usually done by giving the event a familiar name so that “actors are quickly oriented within the less familiar sections of a nonce ritual” (133). All of these elements are used to make a successful ritual, which has at its core the aims of establishing a type of continuity between participants, their past, the larger social world, and the symbols the ritual evokes for whatever reason those enacting them choose to do so (151).

From this discussion of ritual and in particular nonce rituals, the estate sale can easily be described as a new yet widespread ritual of consumption, death, and things, situated within a particular cultural and historical context. The estate sale company—acting as the ‘masters-of-ceremonies’—asserts for buyers that a home’s contents are now a temporary market place

where everything on display is for sale and that these items are free from their former owners. But this is not a marketplace, even if attendees of the sale are told that it is okay to rifle through the things of a stranger and take them home. We as shoppers know that this is a home because of our experiences with home. We know the signification and place homes have in the construction of family within American culture. We know that someone lived here and these were someone's things. But the ritual allows us to negate these 'known' facts and live in the fiction that these items are free of social meaning for someone and are ripe for new, personal meanings in someone else's life and home. Through the fusion of the symbol of home—which is a symbol saturated with complex meanings of kinship, desire, aspiration, etc.—and the marketplace—a location also with specific symbols, where everyone is welcome if they have the money and most material objects you encounter you can buy—estate sales become social spaces endowed with meaning that have the potential to transform attendees and even the 'masters-of-ceremonies' through the sale's (and home's) material contents. Coupled with the guiding metaphor of a sale itself, estate sales as ceremonies are usually very convincing nonce rituals, with most participants buying into and being transformed by the ritual that they do not even realize that they were taking part in a ritual in the first place.

In an exploration of items for sale, buyers at estate sales are able to connect with them in profound ways because, in many cases, we have seen these things before in our own homes and experiences. These are not new, cutting edge goods, but things that have been in someone's home nearby for quite a while. And further, we are able to explore our memories and even social relationships through the various meanings these individual objects can perhaps put into the minds of those spectators. This leads to discursive practices in the forms of

shopping comments. For example, one may express how they had a toy in childhood and have a memory attached to it. Attendees, as I have also said before, pick up on the assemblage of things and nature of a homeowner's tastes over time, although this is also in part a fiction because some items are removed before a sale and in many cases, some items for sale have not seen the light of day in 30 years. Regardless, they pick up on a past owner, and the comments orient us towards personal memories and histories as well as ideas of a former owner and something having happened to that owner. Someone had to own all this stuff! This thought usually brings up ideas of death itself in subtle ways, because it is the most obvious explanation for an entire estate to be sold. It is even found in grammar, as people use past tenses and speak of the past when talking about former owners.

The estate sale as a ritual, thus, makes us consider our own relationship to the larger material world, to death, to our own biographies, and to a stranger represented by the goods constituting an estate sale. Through the ritual, we are able to see a continuous connection of own person and our past experiences in the material things at hand, and we are also able to trace a larger continuity to a home's former owner which itself creates larger conversations about memory, family, consumption, what happens to one's things after death, ideas of the home, etc. The meanings possible at estate sales are endless and dependent upon the right object and the right person being present. Again, for clarity, this is because estate sales bring together at their core the disparate symbols of the home and marketplace, which have so many different possible meanings wrapped in them as complex symbols in American culture; people can react to these ideas in vastly different ways, yet responses are structured by the ritual itself and ideas we have about innate functions of material culture explored in the last chapter.

Now that the estate sale has been qualified as a ritual that brings together interesting ideas of one's position in their material worlds, I can discuss my experience observing the practices and behaviors of both estate sale workers and attendees during my field research with the Company.

Shamans of Shopping: An Estate Sale Company at Work in Eastern Tennessee

To run an estate sale company or to work for one as an employee without losing one's mind, I think that you have to be quite enamored with things and be a little bit nosy. After a month of working with the Company, this was the only common factor I could trace between each employee I met. Sorting, moving, pricing, and cleaning houses day in and day out can be physically demanding and mentally unstimulating to some, but the 7-8 employees that worked for the Company could truly find in material objects humor and joy as they worked. These work sites included the home of Will, the owner of the Company, and the various houses of their clients.

When I met Will, he and his wife Jeanne had together been holding estate sales for nearly eight years. If I had to describe Will in only one word, it would definitely be object-obsessed. There was never a bit of material culture or an item Will had not seen or read about before, and he was always a constant source of knowledge for the entire team, knowing the history of an object or its price readily at the top of his head. During my research stint, Jeanne, a co-owner and vital part in the organization and running of the Company, was abroad working on a sculpture exhibition, so most of my understanding regarding company practices and the

history of the company itself comes from his perspective. Will and Jeanne started their background in selling used goods through their many travels throughout the world, where they bought jewelry and other cultural artifacts and sold them in the United States. This led to Will getting a job hosting a TV segment on a home shopping channel, where he sold antiques and other imports for 5 years. After selling on TV, in its early days, he ran one of the first eBay consignment store businesses in the country and was one of the first to franchise them, training other managers and employees how to effectively sell used goods for a profit, but the business model soon proved to be not too successful as more and more people started running their own eBay auctions. After, while searching for additional work, Will bought items here and there from Craigslist or at garage sales, flipping items he found at a good deal for easy profits. This side-gig moved into a full time business as Will started to buy storage auctions and entire garages full of stuff. He started asking his friends and relatives for things to sell and one day, received a phone call from a friend who said their neighbors had died and the family was looking for someone help to sell its contents. Since that first sale in 2010, Will hasn't looked back it seems: Estate sales have become Will and Jeanne's life.

Will and Jeanne's prior experiences selling jewelry and antiques in various settings has made their estate sales renowned in the area for their professionalism and organization, and they have a long list of clients waiting sometimes months to have the Company stage their home for a sale. While the event of the estate sale is the most visible part of an estate sale company's work, staging a home and preparing a sale can often take weeks to be done properly, which places the majority of the work estate sale companies do outside of the public's eye. This allows for the employees of the Company I worked with to have a relaxed relationship

with one another as they work, much different from the uniformed shirts and relatively quiet persona of employees during the estate sales themselves. Employees can have moments of pause and play when they are not acting as ‘faces’ of the Company. During these initial moments of clearing a house in the estate sale ritual are when we learn the majority of the employees’ perspectives and feelings concerning items in a home or the house as a place.

The first stage of emptying a home for an estate sale company begins with general explorations of the home, like finding where certain light switches are and where certain essential rooms in the house are located, like a kitchen or bedrooms. After getting a general idea of the space, the team—usually Will and his constant employees, Sam, Andy, Liz, and Danielle—split up into different areas of a house and, quite simply, start digging: They start opening drawers and cupboard and closets, dragging out their contents. During this process, workers sort through whatever they find into certain categories, quite simply sellable goods, trash, and unsellable items. Anything can be sold at an estate sale really, “as long as someone will buy it,” besides things that are obviously illegal to sell like unopened alcohol or ivory. Those items that can be sold are put on an open surface for later pricing and research. Most of what workers find during this time tends to be everyday goods that can be sold and trash, with some small, intensely personal items found here and there.

Because relatively anything can be sold at estate sales, those items that are trash usually are things that are either gross, not a good to sell like food, or are embarrassing for the former owners. While these items are removed before the sale, understandably, these finds usually lead to some commentaries on the consumption and living habits of the former owners by employees. In one house we were working on, as I worked with Sam, we found lots of cigarette

ashes as we were clearing out an office. “Wow! Somebody sure smoked!” Sam exclaimed as she vacuumed up the ashes from within the drawers. There were no other pieces of evidence like ash trays or even a smell of smoke in the house, but through these small remains, Sam made judgements on who the people were and how they lived their lives in a small teeny way: smoking in the den and dropping some ashes occasionally. Even if it was just her picking up on a smoking habit, she picked up on a behavior and way of living that someone experienced in this home. In another room of that same house, when clearing out a dressing table that was painted to look like a ballerina’s outfit, we found an ash tray with a pipe for smoking weed, next to other pieces of costume jewelry and things probably a 15 or 16 year old would have put in her desk. On finding it, Liz shouted: “Hey everyone! Looks like we can have a party now!” and the entire team had a good laugh before it was trashed, and we continued with our sorting. Everyone had skeletons of some sort in their house, and estate sales do the important work of clearing these for visitors to come into the home.

When finding more personal items, however, the Company elects to put them aside in a box for the family, in case the family missed them during their own sorting process. When I asked what type of items they found throughout their times working, employees noted that they mostly found family pictures, albums, scrapbooks, handwritten notes, kids-made pottery, bills, bank statements, and even things like locks of hair or baby teeth. While this is of course very respectful because these items have the potential of holding deep sentiment from their personal nature, this organization strategy for a home also has the effects of also subtly removing senses of personhood from a sale, which also helps to keep the emotional atmosphere as ‘clean’ and emotion-free as they can. Seeing family photos or locks of hair is too

close to home and suggests very real and corporal presents of the bodies that are represented yet absent by these things. I feel that it is, therefore, an essential part of the ritual for the estate sale workers—removing those items that have too many emotional referents—otherwise, the liminal market estate sale companies attempt to make could potentially be punctured by intense emotions, perhaps of disgust or empathetic sorrow. These are items that should not be sold or be given an economic value, and even seeing them at a sale can turn off buyers from certain purchases. To make an estate sale “professional” and “convincing,” these reminders must be intentionally removed.

To workers, items they have categorized as trash, unsellable, or personal are usually of no second thought after this categorization, unless they warrant another glance through their possible humor as illustrated above. They go through these items all the time, and the feeling of the personal, while always there in some ways of course, become more easy to deal with as time goes on and experience with these places is developed. When Sam and I were moving boxes out of a garage one day and I asked her about the personal nature of the work we were doing, Sam said “When working, you really get a sense of the people” but she told me she got used to it. Wanting to learn more about how this distancing happens, I asked Sam, the worker I became most close with during my research, her feelings regarding her work with the Company, especially when finding personal items that represent real bodies. “When I started working here, it was rough at first. I was pretty emotionally fragile and susceptible.” When she first came to work for Will and Jeanne: Sam had just stopped working as a care taker doing in-home elder care and had recently lost a patient who was a dear friend. Working in homes was particularly triggering at times, especially when Sam would find things like funeral books. “I

couldn't really look at personal items or talk about the people there" Sam told me. She would keep her head down and think of the items as they were—sheer items without attachments. The process, however, started to get easier with time: "Well, there's stuff. It can go home to a new home, or it can go to the dump." By reframing her experience and understanding her work as something good, as something environmental and beneficial for everyone, Sam was able to think about her work and the things in a different light, one without so much sadness. Later, Sam added "Death isn't surprising. It happens to us all." While I did not ask Sam her specific relationship to death, I feel that her work with the Company and estates helped her in some ways become more comfortable with death.

With the bulk of the items non-personal in nature, however, as shoppers also often do, employees find things during this sorting process that reminds them of their own past histories and experiences or find items to play with. That's the nature of things in these environments with no owners. Because employees do not have to be rushed as shoppers who are looking for deals do, employees can give items more introspective thought or sometimes quite the opposite, finding time to take breaks and play with one another with things they encounter. All of the employees—regardless of age—proved to be quite playful in the homes we sorted through. When Andy found smoke bombs in a garage, we took a break and watched as we tried to light them. Most of them were duds, but when one lit and yellow smoke filled the air, a smile formed on everyone's face. Going through boxes and boxes of records, Will found certain records that he reminisced on, relaying to me how he listened to them at certain periods of his life like when in college, and he would impart onto me recommendations to "buff up my rock knowledge." Danielle found things that reminded her of her sons and set them aside to

purchase as gifts at one sale, in a sense getting ‘first dibs’. When moving large pieces of furniture out of a back storage building, Andy enthusiastically gave Liz a ride on the dolly he was using around the back patio of a home. While senses of people are palpable in these spaces, the employees are simply more adjusted to the deaths of homes and touching items of the deceased than most of us, and the items themselves can dance for the employees and together they can have some fun.

After employees categorize a home into these three vague categories, it is now necessary for the next stage of setting up the ritual, staging the home as a quasi-market-home. Of all the employees, Danielle in particular was quite good at staging homes and took over much of the main organization it seemed of the sales, and I spent much of the time during this phase of the preparation watching her work and at times asking questions, a bit to her annoyance I perceived at times. When I asked what the goals of staging were, Danielle look at me with a slightly furrowed eyebrow and stated “The goal of staging is simple: to make the sale look attractive while creating order for buyers. No one likes to shop in chaos.” Hearing out conversation, Will chimed in from the room next door: “Just because you bring people to a house doesn’t mean they’ll buy what you wanna sell them.” Staging helps buyers see through all of the items in a house, which is a lot, and is intended to make the items attractive and sellable. Because estate sales are already in a home—different from say a garage sale where items can be arranged without consideration of place—many estate sale companies utilize the structure of homes to create vague categories for shoppers, much like any supermarket would organize aisles in its store. Here is where we see two very different American cultural

symbols—the home and the marketplace—begin to be smashed together and the ritual of the estate sale begin to take the shape participants will know it as.

Because a house has designated places like kitchens, dining rooms, and bedrooms already within its construction, estate sale organizers use these ideas of rooms and social sites as crutches to create even more distinct categories to organize the goods in a logical way for buyers. Also, why move all of the goods out of a kitchen when they are already in their active sites of use? The guiding metaphor helps orient those shopping and make the work of the employees which is largely physical labor like moving things and cleaning easier itself. With little work from the employees, spaces like the kitchen are, thus, transformed into shopping categories like “kitchen ware,” where every day dishes like coffee cups and cereal bowls, along with any item used in the cooking process itself, are displayed. More delicate dishware—like fine china, tea sets, or silverware, as well as other decorative elements like vases, delicate sculptures, or ornamental bowls—are reserved for the dining room table, making up the category I like to call “delicate decorative elements.”

Spaces like bedrooms are tricky to stage because they are relatively empty after their contents are removed by the employees, leaving little but furniture sets. Bedrooms, therefore, are usually reserved for specific categories of items that depend upon the specific tastes and habits of the former owners themselves, not on the space’s architecture per se. Some examples I have seen include the “general holiday” bedroom—where one can experience the décor of Christmas, Easter, Halloween, and Thanksgiving all at once, regardless of the time of year—or, my personal favorite as a shopper, the vague “craft room,” where I often pick up my yarn or painting supplies for my shenanigans. The bedroom furniture usually remains with larger price

tags attached than these lesser value goods that are highly specific and, therefore, a little harder to sell. This allows for these smaller spaces to have less shoppers at one time because they usually have relatively niche contents that most people simple glance at as a whole, make a decision on whether they are interested in it or not, and move on or explore more deeply. Most people do not need more Christmas decorations in March, unless, perhaps, they really love Christmas. And, in most cases, unless starting a new home, houses already have some type of bed or bedroom furniture because these pieces are relatively essential for good sleep.

“Going Through Dead People’s Houses”: Shopper’s Responses to Estate Sales

*“Estate sale today, from 1 o'clock to 4
You go and get ready, I'll go start the car
Better to be early, then we'll be the first in line
And you know how I love this, it's amazing what you'll find*

*Going through dead people's houses
Wonderful things they have collected
Open the drawers and trunks and closets
Don't leave a corner uninspected”*

- “Estate Sale” by country artist Cheryl Wheeler

The beautiful thing about the estate sale is you can find any type of person there. While the socioeconomic backgrounds of participants in estate sales are, of course, highly dependent upon the location of the sale, when I asked Will who his customers are, he told me: “ Well, in the first class of buyers, you have your eBay sellers, resellers, and antique shop owners, and then we have your more average folk like collectors, who only buy one or two specific things at

a sale, or retirees, who usually just come to look around and end up leaving with towels or cleaning supplies. The last group are local refugees or immigrants, people who are trying to put an entire house together on a budget. Or sometimes they're a new couple who is doing the same thing." For whatever reason they participate, estate sales offer for buyers a place to explore and imagine alternative ways of living and considering the world; to discover alternative futures and possibilities for themselves, for their homes, and lives; to play with the past and their own experiences through material things; and, as well, to buy things to sell somewhere else for a massive and easy profit. Estate sales are at their core economic happenings and would not be held at the rate they are today in America if they did not offer financial value; this is what makes estate sales so fascinating to examine socially because the sentimental and personal intertwines and blurs with the financial in a way that works and makes sense for us.

At the first sale I attended as an employee during my field research, I attempted to interview several people Sam introduced to me that she knew as regulars. The first shopper I met was Mitzy. She was probably in her mid-60s and had her blonde hair tied in a high pony tail, which flopped side to side as walked through the kitchen, scanning the room in a bit of a frantic manner to find something of interest with no real object in mind, much like a frog would chase an active fly. Seeing Sam, Mitzy's blank stare turned into a smile, and she came to say hello, and so we met. When I started to ask her some questions, Mitzy told me she had attended estate sales for the last 9 to 10 years, going pretty much every weekend. Mitzy limits the sales she attends to those that are in driving distance—which, for East Tennessee, probably means 30-40 minutes from her house. "It's not just the deals," Mitzy shared when I asked why

she attends sales so regularly. “I like to look at houses. I love to see the personality of the people and their taste. I find it kind of cool.” When we talked more about her decade of estate sale experiences and my project, Mitzy brought up attending an estate sale of a couple she knew. “It was terrible. It was very hard to know them and buy items—I didn’t buy anything because it’s hard to hold those personal items and dig through their things.”

The entire time we talked, understandably, Mitzy’s eyes scanned throughout the room, looking at its contents for their potential ‘value’, continuing an active search of the environment. “How did they have this much stuff put away in this little kitchen?” she said suddenly in the middle of one of my incessant questions, motioning to rows and rows of crystal glassware and glass bowls on a countertop. “I’m sorry sweet heart, I’ve gotta go shop!” and with that, Mitzy was off. Although brief in length—probably no longer than three or four minutes—confirmed a lot of what I had been seeing at estate sales and doing myself as an estate sale attendee, which was going to estate sales also to see the personality of people through their things and making comments about their tastes, practices or consumptions, or habits, like Mitzy suddenly did at the end of our conversation when she commented on the number of things. The short encounter showed that people other than me were reading estate sales as places that were not sheer markets removed from people.

Mitzy also shared the story of going to an estate sale of those she knew and how it prevented her from purchasing goods at that sale, showing how close relationships and knowledges of persons and place can prevent buyers from taking part in sales because of the incredibly emotional nature estate sales can have. A lot of companies, in fact, have policies that do not allow close friends and relatives to attend the sale for this reason, or if there is no

explicit policy, companies discourage the practice. A 2018 Industry Survey by EstateSales.net with over 1000 responses showed that only 8.59% of companies encourage their clients to attend their own sales, with 50.83% discouraging the practice and 40.59% not allowing it at all (EstateSales.Net 2018: "Industry Survey"). With the Company, the policy was that client were not allowed to attend sales. When I asked Will more about why he chose this policy, he told me about prior sales he organized where the clients attended: "They just weep and stand in the living room and cry. It takes up the time of staff and to be honest, it's not their job." Will continued: "it's an understandable emotional reaction, but its counter productive to the selling process." Will does have a point. How would you sell items when someone is crying over them while you shop? It doesn't exactly encourage a buyer to pick up a good if they see these responses because they themselves can leap onto those buyers and make the goods seem more like bits and pieces of an actual body, like the buyers themselves are ravens picking at a carcass. When Jeanne returned from her trip to work on her sculpture work, I asked her the same question when she was giving me a tour of her studio. She gave a more poetic answer: "They're not just things. They call for you." Thus, friends and relatives do not make the best customers and actually detract from the estate sale as a ritual because it is impossible to convince them the space is not a home filled with love, memory, and attachment.

Throughout my field work, I had many other quick, wispy interviews like the one with Mitzy, primarily because the time it takes to do an interview took away from customers desires to shop and find something before another person snatches it. This made it very difficult to get deep understandings of customers sentiments, but I soon realized, even if I worked with the company for a year and made some closer contacts from regulars, I mostly likely couldn't get

those deep feelings to come to the surface level anyways because that is not the type of space the estate sale is. It does not allow for these deep conversations, only surface level ones: The space itself is modeled and guided by the metaphor of a marketplace. Markets are not places for deep conversations, even though estate sales do provide more nuanced and interesting types of conversations because of the idea of home and person that saturates all items at a sale. I stopped worrying and started listening harder to what people were telling me and what they were doing.

At a different sale, I met a man in his late 60s named Phil. He was attending the sale with his wife, who was “lost in another room looking at quilts.” It was about noon, and he told me this was their fourth sale of today out of six planned. “We started coming to these things about six months ago, and now we go every week. But we’re retired, so we’ve got all day!” When I asked what brought them to sales and made them so enjoyable for the couple, Phil said “it’s the fun of finding stuff you can use—you don’t really know you needed it until you see it.” He said they mostly buy small stuff as a “retirement hobby” and usually buy things like everyday household supplies when they run low. Phil and his wife make their own little ritual out of estate sales, he told me: the couple get up pretty early, each get a Chic-Fil-E Chicken Biscuit, and they wait in line for sales to open at 9 A.M. The majority of the customers at the estate sales I have attended have been of this type, older retirees. Estate sales offer very practical purchases for retirees who attend sales, especially hidden deals on expensive, everyday necessities like cleaning supplies or laundry detergent. Most older buyers already have their own living room sets and larger pieces of furniture in their homes. They don’t need to buy these larger items or have space for them in their already filled homes, but everyone needs cleaning supplies.

Sometimes, market prices are unaffordable with those on a tight budget with perhaps only a small income from a work pension or from social security. While half of a product may be used, most customers do not care because they can find these essential supplies at 15% of their original retail costs, sometimes even less. This is a great way to save money for those in precarious situations, while also ensuring these chemicals are used in proper ways and not released into the environment.

One reason people attend estate sales as demonstrated in this example is because they are cheap. Pricing in general is funny at the estate sale. While I could have talked about pricing as a practice for the sellers—an act of researching, approximating value, and thinking of the right price for buyers to desire it—this is very regular and normal behavior; the way in which buyers at estate sales interact with prices, however, is what makes it strange and fascinating. As the homes become more empty throughout an estate sale, the price strategies that are used by companies change to help bring enthusiasm back to the space that can get sluggish when its contents are removed. These are incredible prices when compared to mark, which helps bring back an atmosphere of excitement. During the last two hours, items move to 50% off; the last 30 minutes, anything you can fit in a bag for \$5. This dramatically changes how people move through the space and their ‘noticing’ of objects. I have seen a woman walk by a set of green glasses over and over and over again to only notice them once she had entered the room for the fifth or sixth time and the set had been reduced to \$5. Smiling, the woman swept up the entire set into two grocery store plastic bags and merrily went to look at rooms she had already seen again and again and again for what she missed.

Besides practically and for economic reasons, why else do people flock to estate sales?

These same people could go to a thrift store instead and pick up cheap items. Above all else, I feel the estate sale provides cheap entertainment for attendees. They're fun! People who like to shop love estate sales because the items you find are not regular or everyday like you would in a supermarket. The home part of the estate sale is what makes it fun. All of those mentioned thus far have talked about joy in some way being involved in their estate sale experience: Mitzy likes looking at the collections of those former owners, and Phil likes to come to discover things he didn't know he wanted. Estate sales offer small moments of the unexpected. They are also fun because one can imagine what it would be like to own certain things and what that would mean from who they are or what they could be. For example, maybe Phil wanted to pick up a new hobby and found a water color set for cheap at a sale. In that moment, Phil could perhaps imagine what his life as a painter would be like and the beautiful, delicate products he could make with the materials he has just found. Maybe Phil had bad motor skills and, instead, thought of the muddy paintings he would make, never having the time to achieve mastery and control of the brush. Items give possibilities and imaginations for the future.

Another great example of people having fun at the estate sale were a couple of unlikely friends I observed at one sale. A woman in her late 40s and a tall, plump man in his early 30s walked into the kitchen where I was stationed. The two were dressed in work clothes and it was about 3 P.M. on the first day of this particular sale. This kitchen at this home was decorated with little fat Italian chefs—they were on cheese plates, bowls, napkins, dish clothes, paintings, everywhere—and the two enthusiastically grabbed every item with a chef in their field of vision. I asked the pair "Are either one of you a chef?" and the woman replied, "No, but he



One of the chef's items bought by the pair at the sale.

makes good chili." I was intrigued by the relationship between these two people, so, naturally, I eavesdropped as they shopped, although I didn't have to: every time either of them found something they liked, they would enthusiastically scream to one another about their finds.

When the larger man found a pair of wooden replica ducks from the early 20th century, he said to his friend "I hate to show you this—" interrupted by her screams of, "OH GOD! I LOVE this! I HAVE to have that!" This happened back and forth between the pair as they shopped for one another. On finding other items she liked, worried about space in the car, she responded in the same way: "OH GOD; I love the duck Where do you put the ducks, though? Will it fit in your car? [*Motioning to a crystal candle holder*] Put that up I'm not gonna get it. I'm getting the ducks!" Although I wouldn't have thought they would be friends upon first glance, the two proved to have deep connections with one another by having intimate knowledge of the

other's tastes. The two were most certainly intimately connected enough to know what type of dishes the other would like or what type of fabric patterns the other would be interested in: to know this information, it requires knowledge of a person's most private and secret spaces, where access is rarely given to strangers or shallow relationships. Estate sales as ritual spaces allow for relationships to be acted out as individuals shop together. These moments also showed further how the personal is enacted in narrative and communication within these open ritual spaces estate sales provide in the form of 'shopping talk'.

Customers also play with the past and their personal memories at the estate sale, even finding connections at times to their own individual losses. One woman I was chatting with as she was looking at set of orange and white aprons with chickens on the border suddenly turned to me in our conversation on her purchases and said, "I think I'm getting these aprons." The woman whose name I didn't quite catch then began talking about the passing of her mother: "I collect aprons. I have about 200 of them at home. I collect them because my Mom did. She would take them from her collection and iron and starch them. Now, I do the same." By buying aprons, the Woman, in a sea of objects, found a moment to think of her departed Mom and to connect with her for a brief moment, before she left our conversation abruptly to go buy something else. Her practice of collecting aprons and actively interacting with them through the 'proper' ironing and sorting and starching required, perhaps wearing them while she cooks, elongates this connection into everyday practices like cooking. Ideas of 'proper' apron care and the greater symbolic nature of the aprons are based upon her experiences watching her Mom and learning these etiquettes and behaviors. Estate sales, then, and items within them allow for these further moments of touching reflection and bridging as object do, outside of the estate

sale. This was perhaps the most deep moment I found at the estate sales during my research, and I feel her responses showed the extent to which estate sales can take participants in these open spaces while still being successful rituals.

Bringing up the death of a relative is not easy for anyone. I'm sure had the death been closer, these aprons could have caused intense emotions of memories, but mentioning this relationship to aprons to me did nothing to the woman's emotional state; it actually excited her and allowed her to connect to the dead. This understanding and mediating of death through material things shows a more relaxed and everyday understandings of death that the estate sale provide as playful shopping centers and homes. A less personal example of death at the estate sale comes from another time I eavesdropped on the conversations of customers. I was watching this group of three older ladies in their late 60s and a couple in their early 40s dig through two closets in a master bedroom. They were looking through all sorts of clothes for men, women, and children, trying things on. The two groups engaged in conversation over the clothes they were together looking at. This is roughly the conversation:

Wife: [To her husband] "There are more clothes over here"

Late-60s Lady 1: "For men"

Husband: [Picking up a shirt] "A very tiny man"

Late-60s Lady 2: "A tiny man; they were both so small."

Late-60s Lady 3: [Looking around the room] "Two little people in such a small house."

By commenting on clothes, often the most personal things that are left of a person at a sale because they themselves dressed and clothed the body, these two groups of people were able to create a story of a those who lived there: a small couple who lived a long, long time ago in

this tiny place and are now gone; leaving their tiny clothes and things, the tiny two went to a better place. Subtly, death is brought into the picture without even being realized through the use of past tense. Where else would these people go? Everyone needs a home, so who would leave theirs unless they died? These are not just clothes, but reminders of death and death alone. Even in the case when no one died, like in pretty much all the sales I worked, these commented on clothes or other items are always in the past tense, because the home itself can only be seen as something in the process of ending, something that is no more.

Conclusion

As a ritual space, the estate sale offers its attendees open and closed symbols that allow them to interpret the estate sale in vastly different ways. These very general ideas of home and market come together to allow for these types of discourses. Besides being an easy way to set up a sale, as Myerhoff showed in her discussion of ritual and the Graduation-Siyum, a set of strong guiding metaphors drawn from familiar and standard social sites or experiences that already have a plethora of cultural meaning available can be incredibly useful for those creating new rituals to engage participants and convince them of a rituals assertion, and I think this holds true in the estate sale. By using the metaphor of a market, estate sale companies as shamans or “masters-of-ceremonies” draw together the paradoxical symbols of the home—which I have shown is saturated in ambiguous emotions and memory for individuals based on their experience in those places—and the marketplace—a social site experienced individually

that is usually removed of sentiment—claiming that the home is now a market ripe for the picking.

By organizing in this way—using a symbol that is “open” and allows for lots of interpretations to take place because of many meanings it can hold—the buyer can become invested in the ritual of the estate sale as a space for economic activity, convinced it is not *exactly* a home. At times buyers or the employees themselves may mention the home or allude to the former owners through comments, but this is never enough to fully take buyers outside of the comfortability of purchasing goods. That is because these moments are never enough to take them entirely out of the sale. They are thoroughly convinced by the effective work of estate sale companies and are engaged in the “dancing” things they see. The items that would take them out of the sale entirely—like family photographs and other personal momentous—have been removed by the employees, so they can shop care free without too much sticky atmospheric “goo” left behind by the former owners. The metaphor allows them to treat the space unlike they would if they were in a home, yet they are in a home! These metaphors above all else help uphold the veil of fiction that estate sales as rituals offer their participants, as the next section will show through ethnographic examples of how estate sale shoppers and their comments on goods for sale.

4

The Burden of Things?:

A 'Haunted' Sale and a Case of 'Self-Death'

Introduction

With the estate sale characterized as a ritual that vitally transforms for participants 'old' goods into vehicles for personal understanding and items of memory work, what happens when family members hold the roles as 'masters-of-ceremonies' in an estate sale? Or, what happens when in the face of death, one begins to sell their own things? This final chapter looks at two alternative ways I have seen homes die, a family conducting an estate sale on their own for a deceased relative and a 102-year old lady selling and donating her goods, knowing her death is proximate. As alternatives to the company-run estate sale or simply cleaning out the home of a relative looked at in Chapters 2 and 3, these two moments show the variety of ways Americans can deal with their material culture as homes come to their timely deaths. These were two experiences I did not expect, and I did not take field notes during these encounters; however, as soon as I left each space and could find pen and paper, I wrote down everything I can regarding my thoughts and memories at the time to try and capture them for their significance. Observing what looked like an overwhelming and difficult process in both of these instances, I left these places struck by some questions that I hope to end the work with: does the sheer

number of things and the strong memories attached to them within homes cause a sense of burden for families when they are forced to clean them out at the end of a home's life? While estate sale companies surely help the physical and temporal burdens of clearing out a home, does the work of an estate sale company take away opportunities for relatives to discover items they didn't know existed that have potential for strong memories attached? How does the presence of a family member or the person themselves influence the behavior of shoppers?

The first example, that of a family affair in an estate sale, shows how when estate sale participants are close relatives, there are more occasions where the ritual drama can be broken because of intense personal connections between the organizers and those departed. Because the family is present, they offer an authority of the space and can provide narrative to many items, unlike estate sale employees. In this experience, narratives of the departed easily came up as I negotiated prices for goods, which I feel impacted the atmosphere of the sale and how goods were priced. While the family of the person departed, a sister and Aunt in this case, were involved in the sorting and selecting goods among themselves which was the main focus of Chapter 2 with my own family and cleaning out Mamaw Stiles' house, my family did not hold an estate sale and did not have to mediate our memories and the material remains with economics, like those at this sale obviously had to. I further explore the atmosphere at play and how the presence of the family-as-sellers changed that space through a quick consideration of the garage sale, an American rite that has been examined as a ritual by the anthropologist Gretchen M. Herrmann. Particularly, I use Herrmann's writing on garage sales as places where affective sharing takes place between sellers, the story holders of these items, and buyers.

The second part of this chapter, the story of Mary, shows how one can become comfortable with their own death and what will happen to their material remains—body and homes—once they have passed. I found Mary cleaning out her own home in Poughkeepsie with the help of Sam, a man in his 60s, who she hired to help her with this challenging work, one day when volunteering for a local arts nonprofit and picking up donations from her home. Talking to Mary for a while and getting a tour of her home and her things, I left the space touched by her story and even carrying a few items to take home myself after Mary asked me if I wanted to take a few things. While this moment was brief and there was much trouble communicating with Mary because she was hard of hearing, through a quick tour of her home, the stories she told about artefacts or even about what she was donating—book cases her husband had made for her book store some 40 years ago, in the case—showed a woman whose life had been deeply influenced and transformed by things and how she was coming to terms with those changes and changes as she aged. Mary’s relationship to her material world dramatically shifted even further, it seemed, once she started to accept her death and realize she would leave so many things for her family members to clean up. I position this encounter with the scholarship on a rite Montreal called ‘*casser maison*’, literally ‘breaking of the house’, where elderly people divest from their material goods as they move into an assisted living center and give items to relatives and friend to ‘ancestralize’ oneself.

The Haunting of a Strawberry Dish Set: A Family Estate Sale

I pulled onto a side street, looking for an alright place to park because the driveway of the sale was already packed full of cars. I had to walk over four lots to the sale but this probably

meant it was a good one by the size of the crows. Walking into this sale, I immediately was struck by the disarray and mess that comprised the interior and exterior of the home. Items were everywhere, precariously stacked here and there, in odd organized categories with no prices. "Sorry about the mess," a woman in her 40s, messily dressed and obviously tired and frustrated, says to me as she glances around the room, "We didn't expect it to take this long." I immediately knew that they were not professionals, those experts who could transform a home space into an organized, effective liminal ritual space. I immediately became excited, thinking I could get a good deal here or there, the sellers probably not knowing the outside market price for such goods. "Oh, you're fine!" I say, a classic Southern expression for when someone has apologized but really have done nothing wrong or inconvenient to warrant it.

I began to move about the space, taking it in with my senses. Using the term jungle to describe the masses of objects, boxes, and pieces of furniture would have been appropriate. I was an explorer, moving through room to room, digging inside boxes and examining what was on display, traversing seemingly unlooked and unexamined terrain. I found myself in what looked to me a kitchen, but it was now a place to sell Christmas decorations and used kitchenware. I continued looking and digging like a dog trying to find a bone, searching for something with a particular odor of my personal tastes. Then, suddenly, I stumbled upon something that struck me: a large cream dish set, charmingly decorated with bursting red strawberries, white flowers with buttery-yellow centers, and periwinkle blue edging surrounding the rim. Each piece wrapped in newspaper, I slowly started to unravel each pieces' packaging, as if each were a newborn being awoken from a long nap and unswaddled to a bright new world of unlimited possibilities and futures. I exposed more and more of my new

friends. Altogether, there were at least 6 place settings and over 40 pieces when I counted, but I could not see all of them inside of the deep box. I knew though that the cache included at least several serving plates, a few bowls, dinner plates, some coffee mugs, small desert dishes, and a sugar bowl with its matching lid. This field of strawberries, to me, was perfect, and I thought it might make a great gift for my Mother who had just had a birthday. Our family was in need of a new set of dishes, too, for our family farm because after my Grandparent's death the dishes that were formerly stacked on the shelves of their kitchen were claimed by my Uncle when dividing the everyday things that made up their home. I thought they would be perfect because the dishes were like the old ones as well, which were yellow and green with motifs of apples and pears, and I thought they would make a nice replacement, making the empty cabinets full again like I hoped the household would too soon be, like it once was in my memory.

I asked the nearest shopkeeper, who was the niece of the deceased, how much they wanted for the set, and she said she would have to call over her Aunt who knew more about the prices. "I didn't think anyone would want to buy that," she said to me honestly, in a sober tone as we waited for her Aunt. When she came over, the still messy-haired and evidently tired woman who had welcomed me before, she said there was a number she had in mind but asked me to make an offer anyways. This is something that I did not expect as an estate sale attendee as things are normally priced, though I should have given that there were no prices on any of the objects for purchase; not knowing how to price them, I sat for a moment in silence, staring at the objects as though I were calculating or attempting to assess their worth, but in reality, I was still thinking about how they would be perfect for me and my family. I had already made a

connection and bond to these objects. While the three of us sat there in silence, she said to me “You know, those were a gift to my sister from her husband. It was for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.” I was struck by the story, the personal connection that this object had, and I felt compelled to share my story. For me, the item transformed for me and became something with which to share my own narrative. I felt struck to tell her about the farm and the cabinet they would sit in, what had happened to the former dishes, how they would be cherished and would fit in with the other items. We had an opportunity to share our life stories, both related to how the object made us feel and triggered our memories.

Herrmann’s work on garage sales, “a temporary public sale of used goods,” is particularly helpful for exploring this moment of sharing (Herrmann 2011: 4). To Herrmann, the garage sale acts as a secular rite where Americans can subtly work out parts of their identity through the divestment of their objects through a sale. Life transitions are often marked by changes in the amount and type of possessions one has, and garage sales are the perfect environment to get rid of items when these subtle or significant changes in one’s life occur. These rites of selling certain goods above all else demarks transitions in the lives of their sellers, like selling baby clothes when deciding to no longer have children or all of your ex-husband’s things after a divorce. Using Van Gennep’s renowned outlining of rites of passage, Herrmann discusses the stages of a garage sale in the same way: first, the goods and individuals are removed from their everyday contexts, stripped of their things, put into a liminal and friendly sale, and finally, reintegrated in the social world with a new identity or status through giving away their items, which allows for the purchase of other items for identity and meaning making (5).

Sellers in Herrmann's reading of the garage sale are the ones most transformed through the process, which is different from most estate sales where the sellers are firms or companies doing the work (7). This is because these are their things and their relationships that are being mediated at the sale, while estate sale companies have more distance between emotions and things when organizing a sale. Giving some examples of transitions she has experienced at garage sales, Herrmann writes about items being sold to mark the transitions of childhood, to help ease the memories of death, to get over a divorce, to help downsizing as individuals age, and to combine two households in marriage, to name a few (7-19). These very different stages in life require different types and amounts of material culture, and the presence of these items can be painful for those who are transitioning in their lives. Narrative and storytelling are especially important parts of moving on for those shifting status or identity (22). As items are picked for sale and are bought by shoppers, both moments offer the opportunity to reminisce "with the friends, family, and/or shoppers who participate in the sale" (22-23).

This transformation and exchange of narrative is described in another article of Herrmann's entitled "Valuing Affect: The Centrality of Emotion, Memory, and Identity in Garage Sale Exchange" where Herrmann examines how buyers are transformed at garage sales using affect theory (2014). Affect is primarily an intersubjective and emotional phenomenon that moves among bodies and objects and comes prior to "representational thinking" (Herrmann 2014: 172-3). Herrmann uses affect to think about how goods become contagious and sticky with meaning from their former owners who impart a portion of that meaning to new owners through 'exchange'—through a goods use in a partial narrative or perhaps just in its ability to generate a feeling or sensation (170-171). It is this affectively charged atmosphere, Herrmann

says, that keeps some buyers in the garage sale market in the first place in its ability to connect and transform people and what makes garage sales interesting liminal markets to study. These feelings do not happen to everyone and are only potentials, requiring the “right person” to recognize its value in emotion (179). Through the interaction of sellers, buyers, and things, affect is made by bodies and picked up in bodies, both forces contributing to one another: “shopper’s subjectivities are fashioned by an in turn fashion affect in a reflective manner within the atmosphere largely created by the seller” Both seller and buyer are responsible for making the affective attachments and encounters happen. (180).

These comments on affect and rites of passage in relation to the garage sale are very applicable to this family-run estate sale and the environment I was in that made it feel different. Something about the dish set when I saw it made me think it was perfect. I do not know exactly what it was that struck me, but I soon attributed it to the cute strawberries and flowers that reminded me of my family farm and, by extension, my Grandparents. When I was told that the item was an anniversary gift, I felt more connection to the object and seller and was struck to tell my story. We had a meaningful interaction, and I wanted more than anything to buy these dishes. I made an offer, and the price she wanted was nearly double what I was able to offer. When I said I was getting them for my Mother, she suggested that I call her and see if she would be willing to pay the price the Aunt was looking for. I started to call my Mother, but my phone was at 1%. I told the Aunt my predicament and asked if she had a phone charger. She told me to follow her, taking me behind the liminal counter that said “do not enter” to charge my phone. I was allowed into a forbidden space for a customer, suggesting that I had become more than a shopper, perhaps a friend of this woman. My Mother ultimately

was not struck by the dishes. I even told her they were a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary present, but that did not strike her. Maybe had she been at the sale, felt the effect of the object, and heard the story from the Aunt. She said they were cute, but not for the price the woman wanted. "I'm only there on the weekends!" she said to me over the phone, "Maybe when I retire to the farm, I'll invest in some plates. But until then, I can't see myself paying that much." She was not in a life stage to get them.

In the end, I did not get the dish set, and it still haunts me. I think about the dish set when I open the cabinets in my farm and see plastic cups, paper plates, and empty spaces, marking our liminal transition, filling the space back up after my Grandparents died and items were divided. I think the woman wanted to sell me the dish set. Her actions before we ultimately could not agree on a price and the solidarity we felt trying to convince my Mother to buy the set proved that to me. Her smile and warmth, although effected by lack of sleep and excessive work, showed me that, too. Before I left the sell, ultimately purchasing nothing and not helping with the goal of the ritual, she said to me with an earnest look, "I hate that I can't sell you the set," but then she grinned "But I'll get over it!"

What is interesting in this specific case is the fact that a family itself is doing the sale. In my experience as a seasoned shopper, this is a rare occurrence. These sales take extensive amounts of time to plan, and sometimes, the daunting task proves to be too much for the family physically and emotionally, which seemed to be the case in this sale based on the price of the dish set and the state of the sale. Because they were doing the sale themselves, surrounded by these emotionally charged objects, they were able to go through a ritual in which narrative and sharing of stories is essential to grieving, as Herrmann shows in the case of

the garage sale. The sellers did not just 'cry' like Will told me they did in his experience with the Company; however, I feel this narrative aspect within this family estate sale created some significant changes to the things like prices of goods that made it a bit unsuccessful, an part of an estate sale's goal is to empty a house.

This affective atmosphere and sharing of stories, however, is missing when a company does this process for you, sorting through and giving economic value to the items of your loved ones and selling them for you; when using an estate sale company, I feel, then, the family does not go through the same type of ritual grieving process or have the same amount of opportunities to tell stories Herrmann explains are necessary for healing and life transitions, where they have to physically sort through the items of the deceased and be struck by their memory while mentally reckoning with the loss. Setting up for an estate sale as a family, thus, acts as a rite of passage where the family can become transformed through a process of shedding things, more of a ritual for the self than a ritual for the public. While buyers are also transformed through these exchanges, these moments may, however, be too much or contribute to the price and perceived value of certain goods like with the tea set that haunted both me and the sister I met who could not let it go.

A Case of 'Self-Death': Visiting the House of Mary

If estate sales conducted by families provide more affective atmospheres for narrative sharing as brought out in this vignette using Herrmann's analysis of the garage sale, this case, instead of looking at what happens after death, examines the practices, habits, and acceptance

of death by a person getting ready for their passing. This moment offers us a rare glimpse into the rationalization and understanding that things can burden and transform those who inherit them. I was recently helping a local arts non-profit move some bookcases from a Poughkeepsie home that were being donated by a 102-year-old woman named Mary, who had owned a bookstore for many years in Massachusetts. I went with Kate, the director of the non-profit, and Susan, a new friend and reliable volunteer from the center, to visit the house and provide some young, free labor. When we drove up, Kate quickly jumped out of her car to knock on the door. While I was watching from Susan's truck, backing into the driveway to easily maneuver the many bookcases we would be getting, Kate was greeted by a large man, who I came to learn was named Sam. We went to a back shed, where the bookcases were cleared of dust and spiderwebs from their storage. We moved the book cases, stacked them in the back of Susan's car. When it was full, Kate and Susan drove back to the center to unload them, while Sam and I stayed and moved bookcases to the front for loading.

The bookcases, by the way, were beautiful—nicely constructed, all hand-made of maple. There were 18 of them in total of varying sizes, remnants of Mary's bookstore days. I started to learn these things and some information about Mary and her donation. Sam told me he had delivered water to Mary's house for years, and he recently retired. The two had formed a relationship over decades of Sam's service, and Mary asked Sam to help her sort through her remains before her death. After moving all of the bookcases and Susan and Kate were still not back, Sam asked if I wanted to go inside. Being the nosy person, I am, and someone obsessed with material culture, I practically leaped at the opportunity. Walking into the home, things were scattered about everywhere. The decor looked as though the home hadn't been

redecorated since the early 80s, but there were remnants and patches of life all over the places. Books as far as the eye could see, tapestries of varying sizes on the walls, and more bookcases, with lots of empty spaces. There were other features that were telling, like a note on the door with a pre-leaving checklist: “hearing aid, cane, money, keys, . . .” telling of the transformations aging does to a body. We walked together through the main room and into the connected kitchen, where Mary was sorting through some of her things. Sam started to tell me that “She sorts for about two to three hours every day, but after that, she can’t do it anymore. She’s so old that just that short amount of work is too much for her.” Finally, we came to Mary, who was standing next to her kitchen table going through some antique books. “Ms. Mary,” Sam screamed, as it’s hard to hear after a century of living, “This is David. He’s here to help move the bookcases.” I smiled and yelled my introductions to her. “There are a lot of David’s in my family” she responded, moving back to her books. “Sam found this in a corner of the house that hadn’t been explored for years . . . Aren’t they something?” I nodded in agreement, as Sam told me more about his work with her. “She asked me to help, and she can’t do it on her own,” he told me. “Isn’t that right, Ms. Mary? I’m helping you get rid of some stuff!” Sam yelled to her. “What?” Mary replied. “Helping you get rid of some stuff!” he replied louder. “Oh, yeah,” she replied, finally hearing. “I just want someone to get use out of them. I don’t want them to go to waste.” Sam looked over and said “She doesn’t really want to sell anything. She just wanted to make sure it gets used and is taken care of.”

After showing some more pages of the books, Sam and I heard Susan’s truck pull up and the doors slam, and Sam went out to help the two load up the last few bookcases. “Show him some of your good stuff, Ms. Mary! I’ll be right back!” Sam shouted, leaving the door to help as

it seemed to be in his innate nature. Mary and I smiled a bit at one another, and then I loudly told her how I loved her collection of things. She kind of chuckled at me, and slowly turned in her walker towards the book case. She showed me a mask that she really liked that was carved from a root. It was very intricate, and she called it an “African mask.” I asked her why she liked it so much, and Mary said, “I love all the little details and his little face.” She then took me towards some books she had taken from her collection to donate alongside the shelves. They were meeting records and publications of the New York Bobbin Lace Society, which Kate gladly accepted for the soon to be completed community weaving and fiber studio in Poughkeepsie.

While Mary and I were discussing the pictures in the book and the intricate technique of bobbin lace making, we turned to the three tapestries hanging above her staircase. I told her how beautiful they were and how much I loved them and seeing my face and hearing the sincerity in my tone, despite her hearing difficulties, perhaps she felt like I would be someone who would truly enjoy those items and use them in a way: Mary looked at me and said “Do you want them?” I looked over and paused for a moment, a little stunned. “Are you serious?” I replied. She said “Yeah. I’m trying to get rid of stuff after all. . . As long as you can take them off the wall. . .” And I accepted, profusely thanking her for her generosity and kindness. I told her I would appreciate and cherish them, and I took two of them carefully off the wall. At about that time, Kate walked into the house to meet Mary and thank her for her donations. We left shortly, and now the two weavings hang in my home as though they had been there for a thousand years. They fit perfectly with my things, adding a new word to the paragraph describing me, interestingly still a part of and inseparable from Mary as long as I remember her in that object.

This perception of objects and the desire for them to go to good homes is very similar to the 'casser maison' ritual found among the elderly in Montreal, although there are some differences in Mary's case. In his article "The 'Casser Maison' Ritual," Marcoux describes how the elderly in Montreal transmit parts of themselves to their loved ones and sometimes to invented descendants by 'placing' things in their care or homes when they move to facilitated care facilities (216). This process of transmission is usually aided by family and friends who come and select some things they would like on their own. While these are divestments from one's material worlds, Marcoux emphasizes from his field research on aging and moving in Montreal that these are also investments in the future continuity of that person doing the gifting, as "it is expected that the divestment will maintain the relation alive" (219). This in effect controls how one is remembered through the dispersion of specific goods (221).

When relatives did not want the donated items of those moving or going into assisted living and they had to be donated to chair shops or sold, these were sad times for Marcoux's participants, who felt rejected and isolated from their families because their things essentially were extensions of themselves and the way their memory would persist (222). In this way, the ritual shows one their true relationships and how they will be remembered or not in their deaths (223). Marcoux argues that "the incapacity to give one's possessions [to loved ones] . . . related to a form of exclusion or isolation. . . [and] why it corresponds, in the end, to sterility in its most complete form (223). It also, Marcoux suggests, "is aimed at allaying the fears of a move which can prefigure death. . . achieving some level of mastery over the arbitrariness of the biological occurrence" (230).

With these factors of the *casser maison* ritual extracted from Marcoux's analysis, I feel that Mary's process of slowly deinvesting through her material remains come from a similar desire to control death in a small way while ensuring her massive collection of items goes to a good home. Although we did not talk about Mary's family besides her husband who made her the book cases, the fact that she uses an employee instead of family to clear the home as those in the *casser maison* rite normal do, suggesting that she does not have anyone who desires or wants these items. By donating these items to local intuitions like the nonprofit I was working for, however, Mary can in a way make herself a community ancestor through her generosity and aid to local organizations, although she will not be remembered in the same way as say by a family member. Regardless, Mary above all else talked about wanting her goods to go to a good home where they could be used, and whether that be a stranger or relative, Mary didn't seem to care.

Conclusion: The Burden of Things?

These two personal narratives of deaccessioning a home and a lifetime's worth of things by family members and the self, then, brings us back to the question of this chapter: are things of the dead a burden for family members? We consume more and more these days, and our homes are filled with stuff. But from this theoretical study of things and death in this work, we have learned above all that things are not a burden: They tell important, essential stories of who people are, where they have been, and what they think of the world. In one's death, the material things remaining stand as both ghostly reminders of the newly formed wound and

absence, and as repositories of memory and love that are still present after death as long as those items and the stories associated with it continue to be told and shared. Time turns objects of disgust and defilement into loving memories of idealized pasts. Going through the items of the deceased is emotional but can also be important tools for memorializing and letting go. It allows for the everyday and minute to be seen for what it is and remembered, as every piece of paper and patch of memory is uncovered through a process of removal, mourning, and healing.

Materially sorting through the remains of the deceased is an intimate privilege because every vulnerable crack and piece of life is on display. It's above all a ritual and rite of passage for respecting and honoring the dead in American culture, which is something so rare. While this process is done somewhat by families, most of this at its largest extent is done by estate sale companies. The story of a family running an estate sale and of Mary sorting through her own things show that the process is possible if done by the self or family, but it is difficult, can be emotional, and takes lot of bodies a time. There are some benefits to doing this as a family or by yourself, particularly its benefits in memorialization and passing on specific memories, but we can't keep everything and not everyone wants everything, even if they are "good" items. And these meaningless items without memory can be stressful and a burden, Estate sale companies, thus, often help us limit these memorial items to just an essential few and erase these larger senses of decay that come with death by helping to remove the sheer number of items in a home that become overwhelming and can remove emotional barriers to certain low prices on goods that encourage their sale.

5

A Brief Conclusion, *or*

A Consideration of the Estate Sale

In its focus on the death of homes, this thesis has tried to characterize the nature of items in mass consumer culture within larger ideas of American family life and homes in general. This was to attempt to show the significance of both homes and things in the construction of individual memory, the memorialization of others, and American culture more largely. This work has examined things in relationship to the fantastic and 'sensuous' meanings they take up as they are turned on their head and 'dance' through the estate sale. We learn from my consideration of the estate sale that things are essential for our memory work, creating senses of identity, and upholding our relationships.

I have shown this through a discussion of my person memory of cleaning out Mamaw Stiles' house as a child in Chapter 2 "The Death of a Family Home". The experiences spent cleaning out Mamaw Stiles' house offered vast learning opportunities into her life, behaviors, interests, and anxieties for me and my family because of the physical nature of objects to bridge distance places and times as Miller described. We also take from Miller the fruitful idea of objects as frames for persons and places, and from the work of Clarke we being to understand homes as larger frames in American social life, where objects that are said to give meaning reside. When narrative and story was introduced to objects when cleaning out Mamaw Stiles' house by a family member or by my own imagination, these items picked up

even greater meaning and were able to be used to further extrapolate and make assumptions about who Mamaw Stiles and other family members like Betty Sue were. Stewarts' work on the souvenir emphasized how we use objects in memory a bit deeper than Miller and emphasized the importance of the "story" in recreation of events and peoples long in the past. I put Stewart's writing on souvenirs in conversation with some scholarship on death to consider how everyday items pick up meaning through their use in memorial and mourning the dead as a 'souvenir of the dead' or an 'antisouvenir'. In particular, I use Gibson's autoethnographic understanding of 'mourning objects' and Miller and Parrot's ethnographic study of South Londoner's divestment in things in relationship to separations from relationships, which helps settle these more general understandings of materiality and memorial in relation to one of the main topics of the work, death, and emphasize the popular practice in the West to memorialize the death through everyday goods.

At the end of this first body chapter, I discuss the transformations that take place in items in the face of death, thinking more deeply about what occurs to items themselves in our social world, not what items 'do' for us as tools that bridge memory. To examine this process and the ways death picks up and attaches to bodies and objects for those close to the deceased or the home itself, I rely on Brown's idea of think theory and Taussig's writings on defacement, which I think both come together in complementary ways to think about what happens when an item is broken or made obscene through some force outside of that object. As goods become recognized for something other than ordinary through death, they are made into a type of 'thing' outside of those items' usual meanings, or the items become 'defiled' as its meanings are inverted through some type of removal, erasure, or destruction. Death fits into

this conversation of how meanings transform perfectly, especially death described as a model of rupture, characterized by intense and dramatic displays of emotion. As argued in the introduction to this work, rupture is fruitful here for describing this personal loss, but examining estate sales as rituals helps us to push back on the rupture model by seeing more everyday understandings of death within estate sale participants active and imaginative conversations, more in line with Ellis' argument regarding the ways families that have members living with life-threatening illnesses cope with the omnipresence of death.

An analysis of estate sales as ritual shows how through its ritual acts and processes, estate sales spreads affective meanings to their various participants, sellers and employees alike. We learn from Myerhoff's work on nonce rituals—a new ritual made for a particular purpose by bringing together common cultural symbols to reach the most numbers of participants possible—that ritual is something used to make claims about the world and the measure of its 'success' is based on how well it convinces others of its validity and reality, while it is actually a fiction. The estate sale as a ritual claims that former homes are market places ripe for picking and absent of memory or meaning from lived social experiences of the former owners; however, because estate sales are held in homes, this can never be so: These items are always essentially coming from a particular household of individuals. Estate sale companies have particular practices to try and limit this affective atmosphere of death within the estate sale. By removing highly personal items from these sales, companies can prevent attendees from seeing the things in the estate sale as they would part of a cadaver, although that is essentially what these items are.

These paradoxical symbols come together to make the estate sale a very complex place, where items can dance for shoppers and show them personal meanings from their own experiences while also exuding for them the personality and tastes of those past owners. The open spaces of estate sales are what allow for attendees to make these different meanings with the items they find while shopping, but the closed portions are important for guiding and orienting buyers through essential parts, like the fact that things must be purchased at a sale. The use of a strong metaphor, like the one of a market place in the estate sale through organization and the use of price, is essential for keeping people invested in sales, but this does not mean that people will be entirely convinced: The dialogue of both employees and customers describe at times the house as a former home that *was* once in this world or of items that *were* owned by someone at times. These are never places devoid of hominess or meaning, until they are emptied; however, architecture still can tell a story and refer us to ideas of home. Estate sale participants are thus, transformed through their interactions with the liminal market place inside a home and the massive amounts of items that constitutes a home, especially because of these paradoxical ideas that come together which make items dance a new dance as new-again commodities in ritual sales like the estate sale.

The final and smallest body chapter, Chapter 4: “The Burden of Things?: A ‘Haunted’ Sale and a Case of ‘Self-Death’”, provides two alternatives to the traditional company- ran estate sale and briefly questions whether or not the physical and emotional aspects of things left in inheritance are emotional and financial burdens to the family. I describe two very different material environments undergoing their deaths that I encountered in last two years, an estate sale run buy a family at the home of a deceased relative and the home of a 102 year old woman

as she approaches her death. The first sale showed how the presence of matter-of-fact narratives and the emotional attachments to things within the sellers as family members creates different atmosphere and relationships possible at the estate sale. Estate sale companies do not have this knowledge, and these stories make things like pricing items nearly impossible for families. The moment of negotiating a price for the dish set I feel is emblematic of this, because that set would have gone for 1/4 of the price she wanted at a normal estate sale. Gretchen Herrmann's writing on garage sale as affective spaces where sellers and buyers are transformed was useful here to further think about what a seller's presence as a family member does to affect at the estate sale. Mary's process of going through her entire life's accumulation before her death is discussed with other larger rites of deaccessioning things like the Montreal "casser maison" ritual. This comparison helped me to understand Mary's constant desire to "overcome" her hoard of things and organize it, in a way overcoming death itself and choosing how her material remains will be distributed and how she will, therefore, be remembered within her larger social world. This is a pretty significant process of letting everything you've accumulated go, but Mary, nonetheless, showed an excitement and love for her things, but because many of the items were being donated or thrown away, I suggest as Marcoux does in his writing on the "casser maison" ritual that perhaps this is because Mary has little help or constant familial relationships in her life to help her, which is why she herself hired Sam to help her and is instead giving her items away.

Through this particular consideration of the estate sale and of the larger themes that constitute it as an idea—material items, the American home, the marketplace, death, family, etc.—I feel that I have made the estate sale seem like a strange place where objects can dance

and pick up different meanings depending on who is in contact with that item. With these many theorists and scholars of material culture by my side, the estate sale can finally take the place it deserves as an essential American ritual where one can mediate ideas about death, individual memories, and former, 'invisible' owners who once owned items at a sale.

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