Death and Stuff

An Exploration of Inherited Material Culture, Legacy, Memory, Obligation, and the Sticky Bits

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This paper explores material culture inherited after death and raises questions about what these objects mean to people. This material culture can facilitate grieving processes, memorialisation and construction of legacy whilst also often creating an impasse for individuals to 'move on'. Using my immediate and extended family as my key interlocutors there is also an exploration of the issues surrounding carrying out a very personal and delicate ethnography and navigating these existing familial relationships as an anthropologist. The objects became entry points for stories and emotional expression highlighting our complex understandings of our connections to those who have passed away. These ethnographic examples also highlight our situation in a wider consumer-capitalist framework and explore how wider social pressure and norms impact our interaction with inherited objects.

Keywords: ethnography, material culture, consumer capitalism, legacy, memorialisation, obligation

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This project was conceived following my own experience of my family's reaction to death. I had two questions going into this project: why do people keep the material culture that was passed down from a deceased relative, and what does this material culture mean to people? Initially, I wanted to look into how objects facilitate the grieving process, but this wasn't an aspect in which people were very forthcoming and it wasn't a 'current' issue, as my interlocutors were not in the early stages of grief. So, I decided to look at different negotiations between death and material culture: objects as facilitating memorialisation and objects as helping us

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construct legacy, but also objects that are problematic and how consumer capitalism creates an obligation to keep these inherited objects.

Fieldwork and Methodology

'Guinea Pigs': Ethical Considerations

I took on the role of being a 'native' anthropologist (Jones, 1970), as my family members were my key interlocutors. At first, especially within my immediate family, I was met by a mocking suspicion. It felt very hard to make them take me seriously. When telling them I was going to be conducting fieldwork, my sister responded, 'weirdo'. Whilst I knew that they were fully supportive and interested (sometimes overly interested, as my mum tried to persuade me to turn my project into a business venture), it was hard to judge whether they were comfortable, and they accused me of making them my 'guinea pigs'. However, this was only initially.

My close relationship with my interlocutors was largely a benefit, as that layer of comfortability was essential when discussing intimate matters. In addition, because the discussion of inherited or memorialising objects often led to discussions about family history, it became a more personal conversation, with me morphing into the role of a granddaughter and away from that of an anthropologist, making my questioning more palatable and less annoying whilst still relevant to my project. My role within the family hierarchy, especially in more patriarchal branches of my family, was limiting, as when questioning I was told to 'shush, you', being seen as the 'cheeky granddaughter'. Also, perhaps my questions were seen as threatening: at several points in my conversation with my grandmother, my grandfather said, 'Don't you feel like the vultures are circling?'

Methodology

Most of the information I collected was from spontaneous moments during visits to different family members' homes, and as it was Christmastime, these moments were numerous. Having the presence of my parents, who asked questions that I did not feel comfortable asking, initially was definitely an aid, as I joked to my dad: 'You've become an anthropologist this Christmas, too.'

I went to relatives' houses to conduct ethnographic conversations, which was an effective mechanism to gather 'data' as it was comfortable for them. Also, it enabled me to see inherited objects and the handling of material culture, which inspired and facilitated deeper conversations. The population I studied varied by gender, class, and age, which was helpful as it opened up avenues of questioning that I had originally not thought about. Interviewing people of different ages was particularly enlightening as it reflected different currents of material culture, such as the popularisation of tea sets as status symbols or objects that were connected to certain aspects of history. like sets of letters written over the First World War.

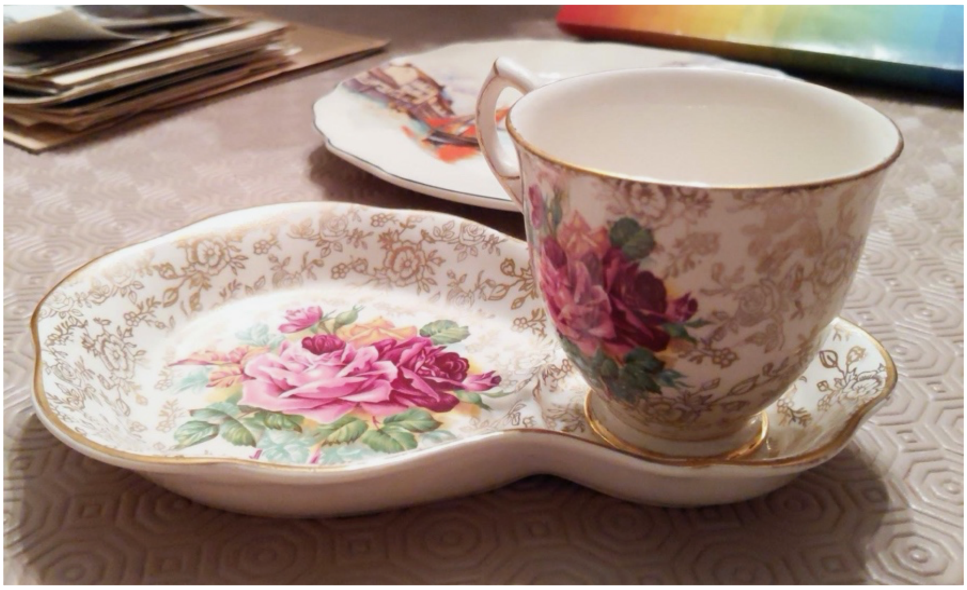

Fig 1. Grandma's Teacups. (Photo: Lula Wattam)

'Passing These Things on to You': The Anthropological Exchange

At some points the research felt difficult, as it became my responsibility and burden to carry the stories of family history forward. Whether it was conscious or not, my grandma Dianne strayed back to family stories, showing her desire to ensure that the truth of 'who we are' and 'where we've come from' is carried on. I believe this is because she fears to lose her memory and grow too old to relay these stories. Dianne literally motioned handing me knowledge and said, 'I'm passing things onto you… as my oldest granddaughter.' This was an important moment in understanding the anthropological exchange, the idea of 'giving back' to interlocutors and the anthropologist as a carrier of stories. This adds a very interesting element to the project, as I have a lasting role and responsibility, adding the opportunity for a 'fair return for assistance' (ASA, 2011:6) through the preservation and recording of these stories.

The Church of Stuff

Objects of grief were almost always treated with the utmost respect, kept carefully and safely: tea sets and pottery kept in grand glass cabinets and rings, bracelets, and broaches stored away in protective jewellery boxes. Much like Miller describes of his research participants' 'best clothes' (2010:12-41), it quickly became apparent that my interlocutors kept their 'best' objects very safe and not in practical use. When there is an interaction between memory and grief, it makes material culture even more precious because, as my grandmother said, 'Well, if it breaks, then it's gone and then the memories are gone.'

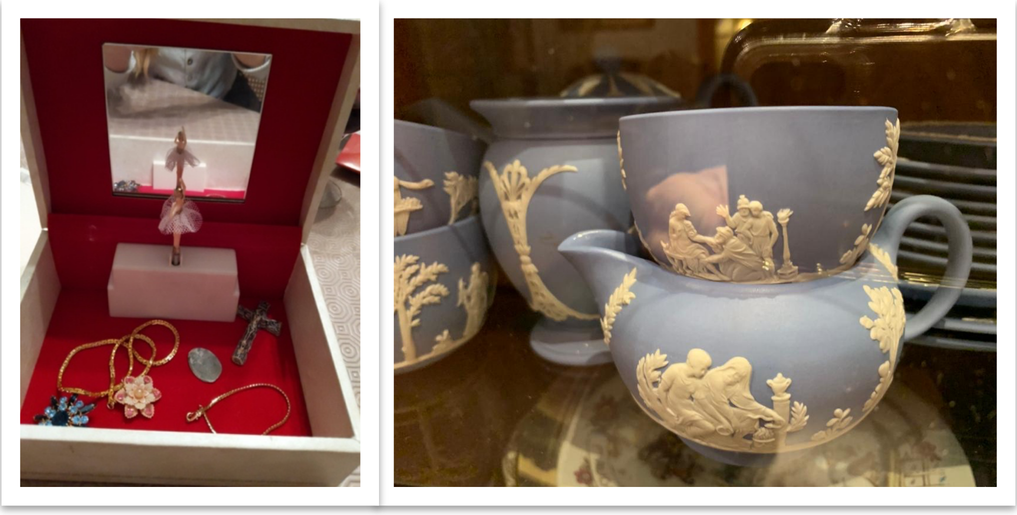

Fig 2. Great Grandmother's Jewellery Box and Tea Set. (Photo: Lula Wattam)

This setting aside of precious belongings also has a theological background, as 'sacred' objects are kept separately for religious service. Durkheim sees the sacred as a key characteristic of religion; sacred objects are 'things set apart and forbidden' (1915:47). With this in mind, as Belk (1993:75) states, 'with the secularisation of society we have relegated the sacred to the material world'. The public display and storing of material culture definitely ties into the desire for tangible legacies and memories of the dead to be respected and potentially glorified as sacred, their lives treasured, like 'holy' objects. I found this especially amongst my older interlocutors, who had cabinets filled with treasures, many of them passed down from their parents, like shrines to remember holidays and gifts and people that have died.

Material Culture as a Facilitator

Port Glasses

Above all else, material culture is used as a facilitator for wider conversations about memories and the people that have died. At dinner with a family friend, the hostess got out some tiny port glasses. She went on to say they were her late mother's, which led to her passing round photos of her mum, facilitating a telling of stories, a memorialising event. This is a strong element of why people have things to memorialise: they 'normalize conversations about something that would otherwise be a difficult dialogue' (Davidson and Duhig, 2016:69), allowing sadness to be reclaimed by stories in an everyday context through the presence of objects in the house.

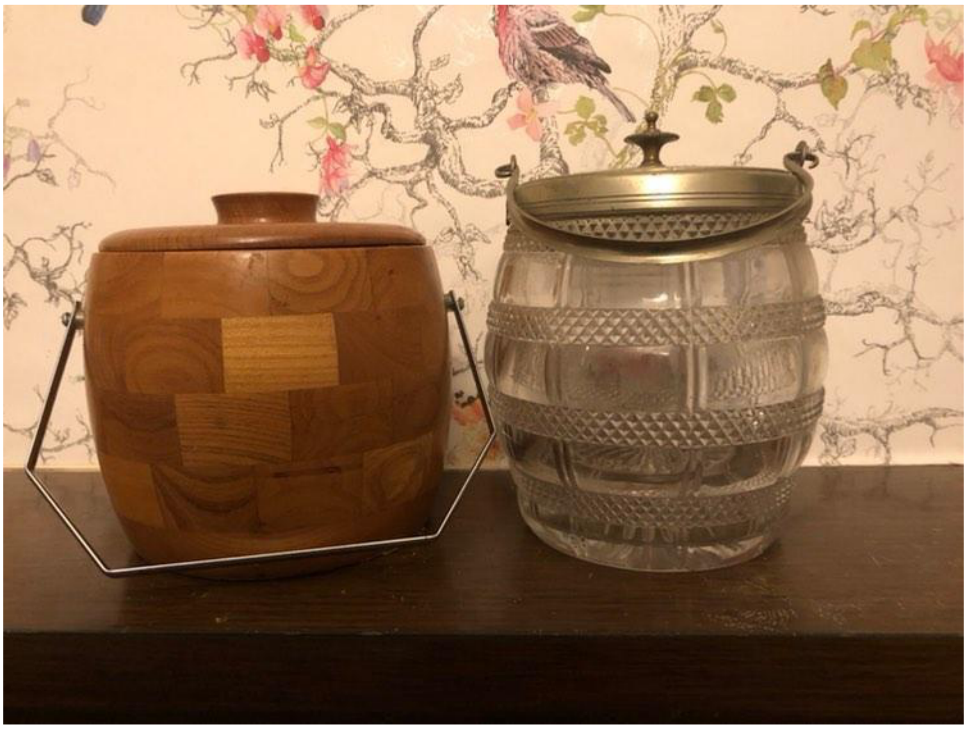

Fig 3. Aunt Vicky's Sweetie Jar. (Photo: Lula Wattam)

Sweetie Jar

Material culture can also be used with the purpose of keeping someone's memory 'alive', such as a sweetie jar passed down from a grandmother. As we sat drinking tea, my aunt Vicky, a poetry teacher from Lincolnshire, explained that she gives her children a sweet from her grandma's jar and they get to experience the same exciting 'ritual' as she did when she was a little girl—at which point her 10-year-old son made a beeline for the jar. She reminisced that it was the 'feeling of getting a goodie out the jar' that she wanted her children to have, too, showing how material culture can be a transportative mechanism of memory. Because we construct our social identity through objects, after loss material culture can be used to symbolise an 'ongoing presence in the family' (Layne, 2002:117).

'I don't really want to know': Problematic Inherited Material Culture

A Bag of Letters

Whilst material culture is often a positive form of memorialisation of deceased relatives, it is not always so clear cut as being a 'good' thing. Certain objects can be problematic. Dianne, my grandmother, brought down a satchel full of letters bound up tight with string and wool. She said it contained all the letters written by her parents during the world wars. She's never opened the bag and read the contents of these letters out of respect for her parents, as their content is ‘too intimate’ and she might find something she didn’t want to know about. The boundaries of their relationship thus remain intact, even after death. This difficult relationship to material culture cropped up several times, such as an iPad containing evidence of dating profiles that the children of the deceased, and his girlfriend, felt uncomfortable discovering, the object gaining an almost ‘black mark’. Ultimately, why would we ever imagine our relationship to things wouldn’t be complex when they signify the complex relationships we had with people?

Family History Albums

Material culture can also cause pain after death. Dianne had inherited a set of family history albums, twenty A4 folders, made by her mother while in the initial stages

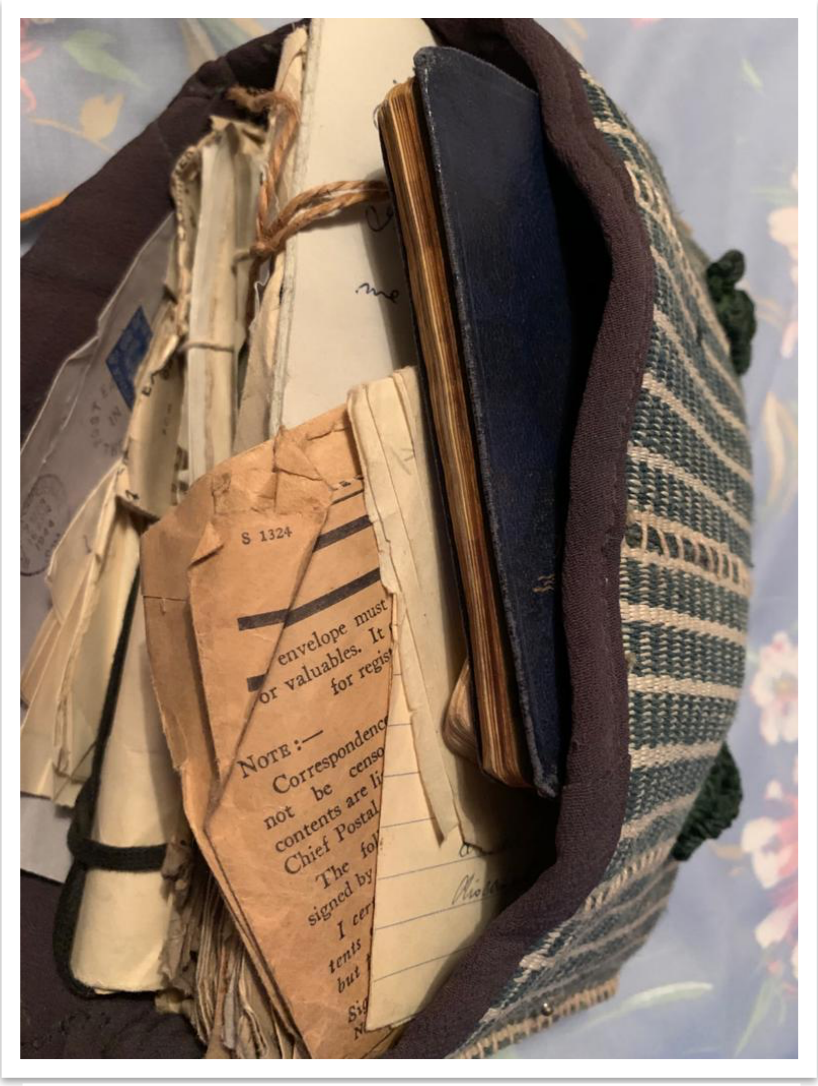

Fig 4. A Bag of Letters. (Photo: Lula Wattam)

of Alzheimer's. Dianne tensed up, looking frustrated and upset, when I asked why her mother had made them.

> D: Partly because of the Alzheimer's, and she wanted to put down what she remembered. So she'd stuck all kinds of photographs in, and stuck names on them, and I couldn't bear it.
>
> L: No?
>
> D: I couldn't bear that—all the names were wrong, what she'd written, a lot of it wasn't true, from what I could remember from my own life. It's weird, it used to make me quite angry. It used to make me angry that she was writing down things that aren't true—
>
> L: yeah
>
> D: —and I don't know, history can't ever be accurate because history is always written from a point of view and someone else might have a different perspective. But there's a photograph and that's who they are. So...
>
> L: Do you still have the chunky albums?
>
> D: I got rid of most of them, still have some. And it makes me sad, because she's written the same thing over and over and over again, because she can't remember that she's already written them. I used to have quite mixed-up feelings about that, and, yes, angry at the disease and what it did to her. But I was lucky, some people can become very different with Alzheimer's, aggressive, but she never did, which was a huge blessing. She retained her sweet personality.

Not only were these albums disrupting Dianne's desire for memories to be accurate, but they also served as a painful reminder of the disease that infected her mother's mind to the point where she didn't even know the name of her daughter. Miller argues we keep memorialising objects that represent 'the moments when the relationship came closest to its ideal' (2010:151). It's apparent that when objects do not meet this ideal, they become problematic, to the point where they are thrown away.

A Dressing Gown

Clothing 'record[s] the body that inhabited the garment' (Stallybrash, 1998:196, cited in Layne, 2002:112), which can provoke painful and uncomfortable feelings. My sister was given our grandfather's dressing gown. She quite strongly doesn't enjoy owning it: it actively makes her feel more distant to him, 'makes me think of him in a dead way.' She doesn't know what to do with it, though: 'maybe I would throw it away, but I would feel bad.' She says she 'wouldn't mind if it was lost', taking no part in its removal; active engagement in the throwing away would feel wrong. Perhaps she doesn't want to engage with the more physical aspects of his death, as a dressing gown is an item of clothing much more intimately associated with the body than, say, a jumper. Rather, she may want to hold on to the emotional and memory-based aspects of her relationship with him, 'the ideal state' (Miller, 2010:151). In her study of infant loss, one of Layne's interlocutors says, 'I don't know what I'm keeping [the baby's clothes] for, what I'll ever do with them, but I have not been able to determine a suitable alternative' (2010:126). This certainly heavily resonated in many conversations I had. Many other interlocutors enjoyed having clothes, as they felt as if the deceased was surrounding them, with jumpers and scarves almost being a 'hug' whilst also containing the smell of the person,

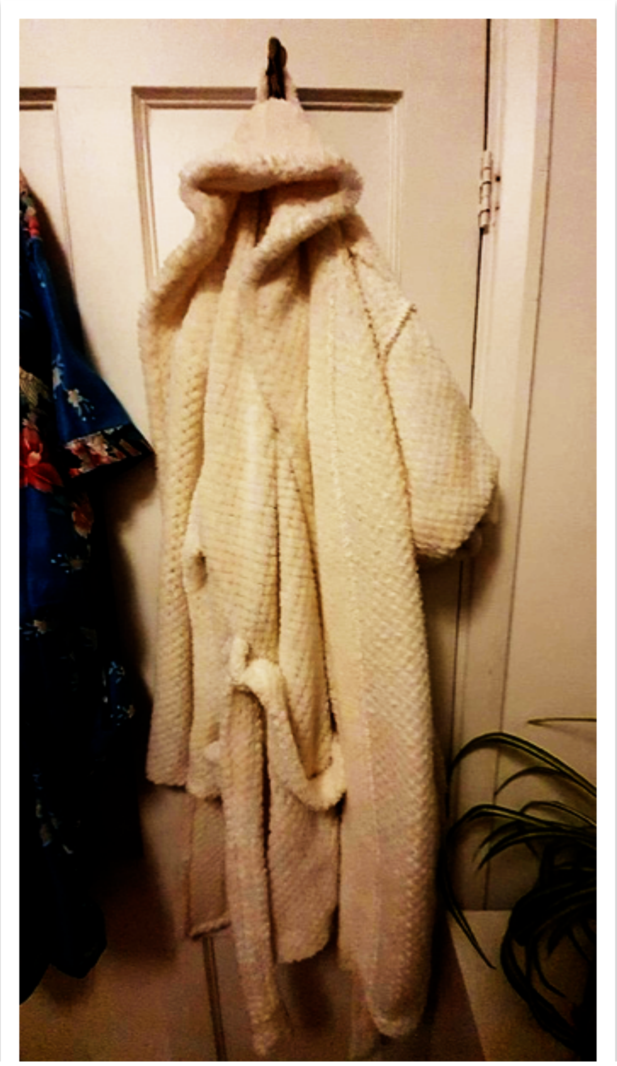

Fig 5. A Dressing Gown. (Photo: Lula Wattam)

even if ‘a bit musty’, producing olfactory memories. Furthermore, sometimes items that are intimately linked with the physicalities of the body are feverishly kept, like a handkerchief that was used to wipe the drool of a dying father, highlighting the subjective specificities for individuals in the wrath of grief.

‘Oh, am I going to have to keep this now?’ Material Culture and the Negative Side of Social Obligation

Piles

Sitting in Dianne’s house, discussing my research, we were surrounded by large piles of things covered in blankets. She says that having all these things from her parents’ house makes her feel as if she’s at ‘an impasse’ and cannot move forward with her own life, that the practicalities of clearing out things and also the pressure of guilt in clearing away her parents’ items is crushing, so much so that she can not stand to look at the piles anymore: as Lowenthal (1998:40) puts it, ‘living among ancestral echoes paralyzes present action’.

‘Death Value’

When clearing out his father’s things, James, my uncle, was given some items and said, “Oh, am I going to have to keep this now?”—as if the very event of death, and who the things belonged to, made them suddenly important, with the ‘death value’ meaning it would be wrong to throw them away even though it was clear he didn’t

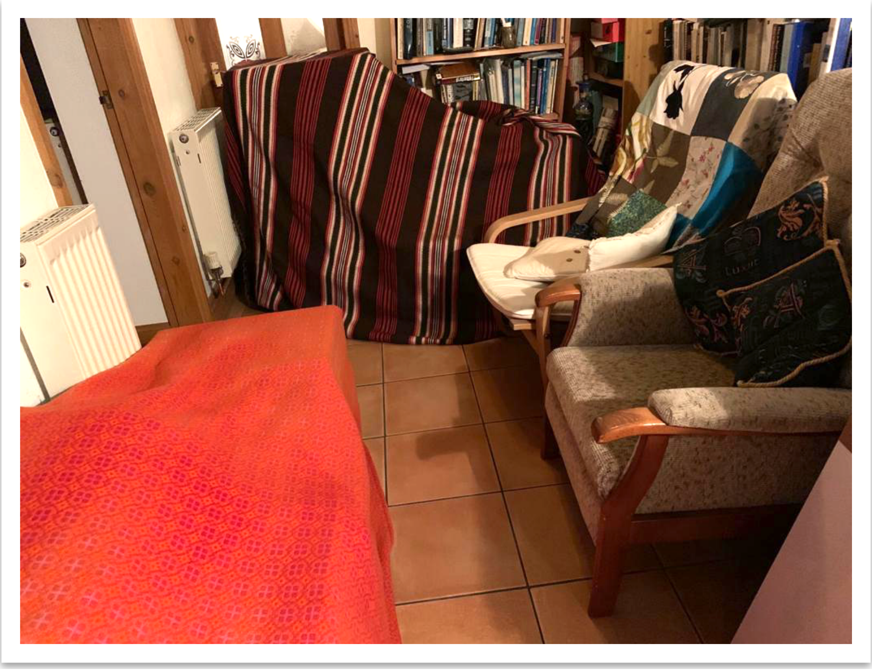

Fig 6. Grandma’s House – Pile of Things Covered Up. (Photo: Lula Wattam)

want them. As Miller and Parrott reflect, objects' significance grows after death (Miller and Parrott, 2009). They are the only tangible physical evidence one has of a person that can be physically held. Our current attitudes to material culture as a manifestation of consumer capitalism, as we are taught that 'having possessions is the most important source of satisfaction in life' (Belk, 1993:75), and since 'our possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities' (Belk, 1998:139), the throwing away of someone's things is like throwing the person away. Especially in the process of clearing someone's house out, where one is overladen with stuff, this can be a hard thing to do. Some people feel enormous obligation to keep things, the very fact that they belonged to a loved one instantly making them special and precious. One may even take random things as 'totalising mementoes' (Miller, 2013:148), because everyone else did, in a manifestation of social obligation. It could be argued that inherited and memorialising objects undermine Western materialist culture because they were not purchased and their value is often not monetary but heavily sentimental, making them more powerful. However, there is a clear tension between the undermining of consumer culture and the way it has socially sculpted us to value holding onto objects.

Keeping For Legacy

A Blue Glass Eye

A large part of keeping memorialising objects is also self-serving as a construction of personhood to understand how you fit into your legacy. This can be especially true in the case of photographs, where we try to identify ourselves in genetic commonalities. Vicky wants her great grandfather's false eye because her son has blue eyes, whilst she and her partner have brown. There is a need for her to allow her son to identify himself within a line of ancestry, almost the same way we like to look at photos of our great-great-great grandparents and say, 'Oh, she looks like auntie so-and-so!' Furthermore, I found that every conversation that started about material culture ended in lengthy descriptions of family history, displaying the importance of keeping ancestral legacies alive as 'familial roots remain our most essential legacy' (Lowenthal, 1998:31) and these roots can be facilitated through objects. I believe that the motivation behind keeping objects is in part because we would like people to keep the things that we feel are important. The conversations often led to my interlocutors telling me what they would like me to keep, such as rings or other jewellery. As we ourselves want to be remembered after our deaths, this is a kind of mutual assurance that we will keep in order to be kept.

Conclusion

Whilst some 'impractical' objects are kept, particularly when the death is still quite recent, it must be noted that material culture without use or beauty is not kept, overcoming the sentimental attachment. My mother, Clara, said, 'Some of my dad's stuff is shite', while quickly clarifying that some of it is definitely real Roman treasure. There are also people who do not engage with material memorialisation, who throw away all items belonging to their dead, whether this is 'trying to avoid the pain or truly acknowledging death' (Layne, 2002:132) or they were just not raised to value possessions in the same way, choosing instead to memorialise differently. It's important to recognise that not everyone has the same relationship to things, thus to recognise the 'silent' areas in this project, too. As Meyer says, 'absence does things, it is performative [and] also, something we engage with' (2012:5).

In conclusion, over the month of research I conducted, I learned from talking to my relatives that people use material culture in many different ways depending on the object and their relationship to its previous owner. Material culture can be used to memorialise, ensuring the 'presence' of a person lives on as well as a mechanism to keep legacy 'alive' and as a construction of personhood. However, given our situation in consumer capitalism, the social value placed on inherited items creates a huge obligation, changing the importance of the mundane and potentially leaving people overburdened with things.

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