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The matter of the unfetish

Hoarding and the spirit of possessions

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In this article, I employ West African ideas of spirited materiality to rethink the semiosis of possession in North Atlantic societies. I investigate this ethnographically through the lens of storage—those things kept out of sight and unused in US attics, basements, closets, and storage units. Things contained in storage form a residual category of animated detritus that US society often pathologizes as "hoarding" when it makes public appearances in the visible space of the home or the television set. Arguing that the concept of fetishism is hopelessly tied to the "naturalist" divide of Western rationality and the dichotomy between persons and things, I argue that objects typically labeled as fetishes are not fetishized but rather reflect a cosmology of material entities as containers for spirit. By constructing an ethnographic model of the unfetish in West Africa, I explore the sociality of possessions as belongings that truly belong.

Keywords: fetish, spirit, possession, materiality, semiosis, agency

The point of attending to the spiriting of things as well as the thinging of spirits is to open the way to the study of reciprocal actions of spirits and things as they generate hybrid forms of possessive agency.

—Paul Christopher Johnson, *Spirited things*

The following article is a thought experiment generated by the kinds of associations an Africanist makes when spending too much time sorting through the molding debris found in the attics, basements, and garages of US households. Having observed (and participated in) the capacity of such kept but unwanted objects to compel human action, I investigate North Atlantic possessions through the lens of West

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African conceptions of how persons and things intermix.[1] Rather than approaching the fetish as a product of misrecognition requiring my analytic demystification, I draw upon ethnographic descriptions of so-called fetishes in West Africa to produce a model for understanding what a sociality of things may look like.

Let me begin with hoarding, a topic of unruly contemporary fascination that highlights the importance of the connection between thing-relationships and rationality in North Atlantic discourse. It is worth noting that a hoarder is precisely a person for whom the distinction between the home's public space and storage space has collapsed—it is therefore socially troubling in a classically Douglasian (1966) sense of the sticky pollution that comes from boundary erosion.[2] But hoarding has recently transitioned from a site of familial or neighborhood anxiety to a nationally televised preoccupation to the realm of official pathology. The new edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published in 2013 (a document that deserves a great deal more scrutiny from anthropologists than it has received), has for the first time included hoarding as mental disorder, one that it is conjectured, "*may have* distinct neural correlates" (Ameringen, Patterson, and Simpson 2014: 489, emphasis added). Researchers estimate the problem affects between 2 and 5 percent of the population (much larger than the 1–2 percent of the population with OCD). While advocates including health workers, professional organizers, and psychologists believe that this will provide attention for people in desperate need of assistance, as Scott Herring argues in his recent genealogy of hoarding's transformation from deviance to "disorder disorder," this new definition will also be used to catalog millions of people as mentally unfit based upon their nonnormative relationship to their possessions. Given that the disorder is officially defined as "the acquisition of and failure to discard possessions regardless of the value others may attribute to these possessions" (Ameringen, Patterson, and Simpson 2014: 489), many if not most Americans deserve the moniker as hoarders, leaving anthropologists to wonder about how normal, even normative, this "disorder" might be.

One indication of just how prevalent such accumulative behavior has become is the ever-expanding self-storage industry, which claims to be the "fastest growing segment of the commercial real estate industry over the last 40 years and now provides approximately 21 square feet of rentable space per US household, enough for every American to stand in simultaneously. It has been considered by Wall Street analysts to be 'recession resistant' based on its performance since the economic recession of September, 2008" (Self Storage Association 2013), and in 2013 alone storage generated $24 billion in revenues. Thus, without saying that hoarding is

1. This is intended in the comparative spirit of Strathern's efforts to reimagine personhood from a Melanesian sense of sociality, and concepts such as "American" or "North Atlantic" and "West African" are heuristic devices or ideal types built from ethnographic data rather than cultural labels describing coherent or consistent systems of thought.

2. One cannot speak of disorder without thinking of Mary Douglas, who forged the link between ritual purity and the ordering principles of sanitation and whose crusade against medical materialism can be seen as an inspiration for this work. Indeed, despite her British positivism and insistence on the utility of the word "primitive," she more than most of her era placed "modernity" within an inclusive symmetrical scrutiny of ritual logics.

never problematic or unhealthy, I am more interested here in thinking about the whys and wherefores of uncontrolled accumulation as an everyday mode of existence for many Americans. Rather than accept the irrationality of hoarding, I want to investigate what storing practices reveal about a magical mode of thinking that typically goes unnoticed in public life, largely because it has been systematically banished from public discourse.

Since 2005 I have kept an eye to issues of storage, moving, and household organization in the United States, beginning with a series of interviews and house explorations in central Illinois,[3] and including more focused fieldwork in North Carolina since 2011.[4] My research has followed and incorporated my own pattern of movements across the country, but most of those I have interviewed (in part due no doubt to dynamics of self-selection in participants) have been white, middle-class homeowners living in large university towns or small cities. I have especially targeted the category of things that are kept out of sight, deleted from acts of self-construction in more public spaces of the household, but my process involves touring and cataloging things in the entire home, visible and hidden. Methodologically speaking, my investigation of US storage space has tried to capture the actual continuum of storage behaviors in American households, looking not only to hoarders but what I call "purgers," those that feel compelled to rid their houses of personal objects. In between there were many "closeted" hoarders, who managed to conceal their often vast accumulations from the public eye (sometimes through the use of expensive self-storage units) and maintain a modicum of outward self-control. But their compulsion to keep things followed the same principles as "actual" hoarders, and many interlocutors were acutely aware of this problem. Indeed, my interviewees often expressed frustration and embarrassment at their inability to articulate why they were compelled to hold onto many of the things they kept in storage, indicating an affective range of mental activity walled off from their rationalist self-representation. Indeed, I found that many of the objects people stored were endowed with personhood, making them inalienable from the individual self and especially the collective identity of the family (Weiner 1985).

The American Psychiatric Association's decision to pathologize practices that are so imbricated within everyday American relationships with material objects leads me to invoke the concept of the fetish: the primary social theory employed when discussing "irrational" relationships to material things. Despite the rich intellectual history of this term, its function as a source of critical insight depends upon an implication of "primitiveness" within our own society, what Christopher Bracken (2007) calls "savage philosophy." In other words, the discovery of fetishism is a work

3. I was assisted in this work by two undergraduates at the University of Illinois: Theresa Rende and Katie Hargrave. Danielle Carr and Parker Mincey were undergraduate research assistants on this project between 2012 and 2013 at North Carolina State University. In our shared reading of theoretical and ethnographic literature on this topic, they also contributed to my own conceptualization of this material. Special thanks to Danielle Carr for introducing me to the Clark and Chalmers (1998) article.

4. In the following descriptions, I describe regional locations generally but do not reveal the precise cities and towns in which I worked in order to help preserve the anonymity of my participants.

of demystication that reveals the human underpinnings beneath the animistic illusion that things are also beings (Bennett 2010: xiv). As David Graeber argues, part of the vehemence of European critiques of African cultural values surrounding fetishes came precisely from the threat of recognizing profound and intolerable similarities across cultural difference; fetish discourse displaced uncomfortable realizations about the arbitrariness of value as the fanciful ravings of irrational others (2005: 8). But recent waves of "new materialist" and "new vitalist" perspectives in anthropology have eroded the Great Divide between persons and things, spirit and matter, leaving open new ontological vantage points on what the fetish might be about (Bennett 2010; Harman 2002; Keane 2003; Latour 1993; Miller 2005; Santos-Granero 2009). Fetishism and hoarding merge as practices that grant things an overpowering agency over the person who is supposed to master their "possessions." Thinking beyond the grand Cartesian dichotomy, I aim to reveal the act of possession as more of a negotiation between people and materiality, in which sometimes the thing possesses us, even as it is "possessed" by spirits or forces we cannot control.

But there is another, less recognizable link between the fetish and the hidden spaces of American homes. For as Valerio Valeri argues, there is a relationship between the fetish and the residual matters overlooked by social order. Valeri juxtaposes examples of menstrual blood and cadavers from Akan *sunsum* with canceled postage stamps and famous paintings:

> The copy of a painting by Titian can be perfect or even better than the original, but the value of the latter is not aesthetic, but rather consists in being unique, in the fact that it is the real residue, not the mere symbol, of the unrepeatable situation in which the Titian produced it. (Valeri [1979] 2001: 28–9)

The material and temporal specificity of the object (the residue of some moment or person that is "set apart" from the everyday) is the source of its value or efficacy because it reaches beyond that which is culturally conceivable. This same uniqueness and personal quality is essential to the seemingly random objects brought together in the construction of a fetish, bundled together to produce efficacy. The idiosyncrasy of how they are encountered, the dadaesque qualities of their construction out of the remains of things, their intercalation with individual (often amoral) motivations, and their unique and irreproducible quality as objects are all part of their role as embodying the powers and dangers of "blind spots in the order." The attic is precisely this kind of a social blind spot, a collecting grounds for personal things, treasured moments that one would be embarrassed to share, and forgotten objects—it is perhaps best understood in this sense as a physical space that works as an extension of unconscious mental processes, or even makes possible ontological alternatives denied in conscious articulations of self and world.

Spirit matters: The ontology of the unfetish

In Latourian terms, the fetish is a Frankensteinian monster that threatens our key ideological distinctions, and so is repeatedly and ritually cast out in an effort to produce rationality (Latour 1993, 2012). The concept of the fetish seems to defy categorization—it is material yet spiritual, an object of exchange value and yet

invaluable one moment and valueless the next, it is magic and yet also religion, self-made but also transcendent and overpowering, individual in construction and purpose yet capable of representing the collective, object yet subject, person and thing. This recalls Jacques Derrida's insistence that "the fetish begins to exist in so far as it binds itself to contraries . . . the fetish oscillates like the clapper of a truth that rings awry" (1986: 227). This slippery quality of the fetish is at once the origin of its uncanny fascination and the cause of its continual use as the sign of the unmodern and irrational, as that which does not belong.

William Pietz's genealogy of the fetish concept (1985, 1987, 1988) traces it to an intercultural space of exchange between Europeans and West Africans, a chaotic cultural borderland in which incommensurate systems of value struggled for sovereignty, producing the "fetish" as a pidgin cultural hybrid from its inception. Pietz argues brilliantly against a purifying ethnographic particularism that aims to replace the fetish with a local concept like *sunsum*, but his reliance on colonial texts, even conceived of as products of cultural borderlands, never succeeds in depicting the African contribution to the pidgin term *fetisso* (Goldman 2009). One of the primary characteristics of the concept of the fetish comes from Charles de Brosses' originary argument that fetishism is the worship of a material object in and of itself as opposed to idolatry, the worship of a symbolic representation of a god (Morris 2005: 821). Pietz maintains that the fetish is irreducibly material, and Peter Pels has similarly argued that we should think about the spirit *of* matter rather than the spirit *in* matter (1998: 101). But while I agree that the mysterious life of fetishes is inextricable from their material form, an attention to regional ethnography makes the presence of spirit agency and performative semiotic efficacy equally unquestionable (Goldman 2009; MacGaffey 1994). Philippe Descola's typology of ontologies places West Africa in the category of analogism, in which unlike the orderly divisions between physical bodies and interiority among the other three, "every existing being thus appears as a particular combination of the material and immaterial elements that confer upon it an identity of its own" (2013a: 222).[5] In other words, as a concatenation of elements that are each themselves hybrids of physicality and interiority, the fetish is ontologically unrecognizable by Euro-Americans—its force can only be explained away.

Thus the concept of the fetish as misrecognition was itself the product of a European misrecognition of the kinds of entities populating West African social worlds. Rather

5. However, I find the geographical prevalence of analogism quite suspicious, for by Descola's own admission it seems to pop up everywhere, unlike naturalism (which seems to have only sprang up once in human history, and that quite recently), or the more limited range of totemism or animism. Furthermore, the chaos of infinite specificity (each entity unique) would seem to provide possibilities for a great deal of variation in just how analogy might be used to produce order, even if binary continuums and great chains of beings are logically useful and empirically common conceptual tools. The apparent equivalence of the visual four-way typology thus seems to mask a rather uneven geographic and historical distribution that begs for explanation. Da Col's critique of Descola around the concept of containers may well provide the path to understanding why the most common ontology is the one that is least systematic—many societies may be much more attentive to porous qualities of containers whose topologies are not sealed but open, making distinctions between interiority and externality problematic (2012: 92).

than accept that fabricated objects that incarnate personhood and take on agency are "objectively" delusional, my research "repudiates a gap between what the 'native' thinks is there and what we 'really know' isn't" (Blanes and Espíritu Santo 2014: 7) and instead seeks to trace the social effects and pragmatic presence of "entities" in our collective lives regardless of their empirical verifiability. This paper joins a growing current in anthropology that combines an openness to ontological diversity with a focus upon the intersections between spirit and materiality (Blanes and Espíritu Santo 2014; Johnson 2014; Descola 2013a; Santos-Granero 2009; Viveiros de Castro 1998).

In articulating a West African concept of spirited matter, therefore, I aim to reconstruct the ontological domain of these "objects formerly known as fetishes," or what I will refer to here somewhat awkwardly as *unfetishes*. The choice of term reflects my interest in making use of the fetish concept while purging it of its central tenet of misrecognition, thus insisting that these animate things remain unfetishized. Indeed, since many African social actors employ the term pidgin fetish (to evoke both potency and misrecognition) the term itself is inescapable. But the prefix [un-] is a reminder that we should explore the possibilities of ontologies that allow for things that act upon other humans and the world at large rather than describing them as falsehood. As Michael Jackson wrote of the fetish, "it is only when we bracket out our essentialist notions of what is and is not a thing that we can fully explore modes of experience that practically transform objects into subjects and vice versa. The crucial point is not to define the fetish essentialistically but to describe the consequences of its use" (1998: 82).

In that spirit, the unfetish can be characterized through the following qualities:

1) *Container*: The unfetish is a material "container" for spirit, a capacity that objects share with human bodies, animals, and plants (making the classic category of the fetish extremely unstable). Not only are there a various kinds of physical bodies, there are many classes of spirits at work as well, sometimes in combination. Heidegger, and later Lacan, both use the metaphor of the vase to think of the prototypical material Thing as not the object itself but the void it contains, whose purpose is to be filled. The material vessel of the unfetish is thus a seductive hollowness calling out to be filled by the diverse fragments of dividual subjectivity that surround it. But we must also be attentive to the topologies of containers, to their openings and crevices and the channels through which, like Klein bottles, something can be at once inside and outside at the same time (Strathern [1998] 2013; Da Col 2013). Indeed, the interior surface of an empty vase is also its exterior carried around the contours of the object to the inside.
2) *Chiasmatic*: Things absorb personhood (or spirit) and thus become persons with whom one engages in social relationships that carry moral weight. At the same time, persons are constantly rubbing off onto the things around them, such that their personhood is objectified and stored outside their bodies. This dialectical meshing reflects what Maurice Merleau-Ponty described as the "chiasm"—the reciprocal fold in perception that makes those who perceive perceptible by the very objects of their gaze: "Between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we may say that the things pass

into us, as well as we into the things" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 123). Matter and spirit cannot be strictly extricated from one another, as in West Africa spiritual energy may have weight or transform the shape of the body that houses it, while the materiality seems to have efficacy in the doubled world of the spirits (for example, eating human flesh while in one's doubled dream state will permanently transform you into a witch with irrepressible cannibalistic desires). This fits with Descola's analogist ontology, in which every entity is a unique combination of various subjectivities and objectifications (2013a).

3) *Residual*: Unfetish things incorporate material residues from places, people, and temporal moments. The *qualia* of these residues in turn animate the thing. Unfetish objects themselves also inhabit the space of the residual, at once valueless castoffs and at the same filled with limitless value, of a kind that is often difficult to articulate.
4) *Concealment*: Unfetishes are "out of sight" but not "out of mind." To see them is often considered dangerous, distasteful, or an overshare of intimacy. There is always some element of them that is masked or hidden from view, and yet such visual blocking is often combined with visibility: as with a mask you can see that something is hidden, or the object is taken out surreptitiously and temporarily, only to be locked up again. The hidden is partially revealed to alert its interlocutors to the potentiality of the unknown, a gap that invites semiotic proliferation. The surface of the container is at once a display and a device to obscure interiority and thereby grant it the potentiality of the unknown.
5) *Semiotic efficacy*: The chiasmatic channels through which people and things pass into one another are semiotic.[6] The social agency of things is produced through patterns of vital connections between things and people that are outside the control of human actors, but are called upon in constructing and evaluating objects. These causal connections are invoked by *feticheurs* constructing their efficacious things, following Frazer's principles of "sympathetic magic." Much as a musician in a possession ceremony must persuade particular spirits into bodies through rhythm and language, the *feticheur* lures the spirit through the aesthetic and semiotic content of the object, while directing their attention to other people and places through further manipulations of its material form. But semiotic pathways can also be forged and channeled in the manner of habit, accreting to objects they come in contact with regularly.[7]

6. Although he never completed the book, Merleau-Ponty's *The visible and the invisible* (1968) was an effort to bridge his theory of the phenomenology of perception with semiotics.

7. My approach to semiosis eschews the simplicity of "symbolic meaning" as mental constructions walled off from "the real," instead focusing in Peircian manner on the intertwining of material anchors and branching mental associations. Our very biology is dependent on neural signals that carry signals that are as semiotic as they are physical. In the same way, our sensorial apperception of objects is shaped by semiotic habit, and the whatever cortical traces we use to remember them in the brain must refer semiotically to content outside the brain (Ricoeur 2004).

Employing the above explications, the unfetish thus might be defined as a chiasmatic container filled with concealed residues, charged with semiotic efficacy and agentive personhood. Peter Stallybrass writes, "what was demonized in the concept of the fetish was the possibility that history, memory, and desire might be materialized in objects that are touched and loved and worn" (1998: 186). I hope to demonstrate such materializations have been going on all along behind closed doors. I should caution that in drawing a parallel with the category of West African unfetishes, I am not suggesting that most North Americans *believe* their possessions are inhabited by spirits but rather that they *feel* and often act this way about certain objects. Indeed, neither should we imagine West African actors relationship to spirited things in terms of belief, a word far too loaded with Christian heritage and committed collective schemas (Gable 2002; Pouillon [1979] 1982; Ruel 1982). Rather, people indicate the *sensation* of presence, felt but not quite perceived and certainly not always conceived.

The unfetish as spirit container

In West African cosmologies, human bodies and things are alike in being physical containers for spirit beings. In Abidjan, the street slang for fetish was *bouei*, glossed as "full." Typically such objects are literally containers or have small receptacles incorporated that hold a variety of materials—but it is also precisely through such things that the spirit is enticed to enter the object. It is the activity of such interior spirits and their material manifestations that both affectively and effectively influences social realities—these spirits are the raison d'être of the unfetish, even as they are intertwined with its materiality.

Wyatt MacGaffey argues that Kongolese objects are dwellings for spirit beings. The sculpture, constructed to attract the spirit to its material form, is explicitly described as a container, a container that accrues efficacy because of the spiritual entity inside rather than the material object itself. Indeed, they are quite literally containers, for in addition to the sculptural form that defines them they have pockets or cavities that are filled with a variety of substances and objects that connect them to both the spirit they belong to and the specific targets they employ that spiritual agency to affect. *Nkisi* are neither idols representing spiritual beings nor mere hunks of sheer materiality; rather, they are vessels through which spiritual agencies of various sorts can interact with, manipulate, and constrain social worlds. As containers, *nkisi* are not fundamentally different than humans, for within the Kongolese cosmology human bodies are also thought of as vessels for spirit (1977: 182). Indeed, MacGaffey writes:

> We observe a continuum of magically endowed "actors," from the nkisi, an object endowed with a personality, through the mask, in which a human being disappears into the object, to the Kongo chief, a human being who is in certain respects objectified in the course of the ritual of investiture. All of them function to some extent as metaphorically constructed extra-human agencies . . . (1988: 203)

Even gravesites are another form of "container" through which people could draw upon the power of the dead. If fetishes are irreducibly material, then they are also irreducibly spirited, and matter matters most when inhabited by spirit.

What makes this cosmological perspective on material containers interesting to apply in a North American setting is the symmetrical approach to social entities (Blanes and Espíritu Santo 2014) that erases the line between animate and inanimate objects, focusing instead upon the kinds of "spirit" contained within each. Indeed, in the hidden spaces where people secrete their most personal possessions, one finds great numbers of objects inalienable from their former possessors, still vitally inhabited by their person.[8] In the space of storage, we find insides and outsides folding into one another, as objects seemingly exterior to the person are embodiments of their most intimate interiorities, placed externally to a home's social mapping and yet deeply internal to its architectural space. Like Russian dolls, storage containers (themselves spaces of rentable impersonal externality) are filled with containers of more containers, inside of which we find traces of personhood so intimate that their owners find them hard to face directly, and so excise them from their surroundings but not from their minds. Each level of containment would seem to distance them further from the very subject they constitute. Again, the Klein bottle image allows us to think about how "internal body parts are unfolded and externalized, while parts of the outside world are enfolded within bodies" (Jensen 2013: 311).

The following stories are intended to exemplify objects that contain personhood, or what Robert Armstrong has called "affecting presence," referring to an object that "sharing psychological processes with persons—sometimes seems as much to apprehend its witness as its witness apprehends it" (Armstrong 1981: 16). One woman in Illinois I interviewed had kept a "memory trunk" after one of her six-year-old twin daughters was hit by a car while walking home. Toni had placed all of her child's things within this trunk, which she had kept unopened for well over thirty years, even when moving it from one home to another. Now turning eighty, she promised to open it with me when she had the emotional strength, but never found it. Daniel Miller and Fiona Parrot have discussed the practices surrounding objects after loss as "a complex pattern of accumulation, sorting and divestment that utilizes objects to help create a long-term processual relationship to loss" (2009: 510). Thus, people like Toni may accumulate objects associated with the deceased but find them too painful to look at, guarding them carefully in sealed and private storage spaces. These were things that could not be parted with, and yet Toni could not bear direct contact with them either. Even though the girl's twin sister had lived on and now had teenage children of her own, the memory trunk preserved and contained the vitality of the daughter whose physical presence had been insensibly removed. Perhaps she feared that to open it would reveal mere

8. Not all stored things were felt to contain personhood. Many seasonal things like Christmas and Halloween decorations are kept for purely utilitarian reasons, while others accumulate wantonly of their own accord simply because there isn't time to deal with them. Geena, a new mother in her 30s, told me that whenever they had guests coming over her husband would rush about their small home and shove everything that he didn't know what to do with, including piles of unopened mail, into the opening on the ceiling that lead to their attic. Such things remain Latourian "actants" in that they have to be dealt with even when shoved "out of mind," but they do not have the affecting presence of personhood.

lifeless objects and trinkets, and she would lose the residual life that remained in them so long as they remained concealed.

In some cases storage is used as a kind of liminal space for such charged objects to "cool off" before being reincorporated into the home on new terms (Hirschman, Ruvio, and Belk 2012). Sometimes such spirited things can never be allowed back into the house, but by containing them in a space outside of social definition until their spirit half-life becomes weak enough to "divest" from the self (McCracken 1988, it becomes possible to search for a new owner and provide a chance for the object to reconnect with life and gain new vibrancy. The effort to provide a new home for such unwanted things demonstrates a concern for the subjectivity of the object itself, like seeking a new home for a pet or relative whose need for care can no longer be met. In rural New England, Linda had lost her mother in the mid-1980s, and at the time unable to cope with the process of sorting through her mother's possessions, she boxed up everything (down to the toothpaste) and moved it into her own home, into which they had just built a large new storage space. Over twenty years later she continues the process of unboxing. In 2008 she brought out a large box containing the entire collection of shoes and asked each of her three daughters-in-law to take them. Many of the shoes were mildewed and bent out of shape, but like a latter day Cinderella, each daughter-in-law submitted to trying them on. The only one who fit left with twelve pairs after delicate negotiation. Even so, months later a final pair arrived in the mail, carefully restored with gold nail polish in places where its finish had worn away. Gretchen Herrmann (1997) has likewise described garage sale transactions as existing uncomfortably in the gift/commodity divide, as owners seek new shelters for possessions they can no longer take care of, but for whose future they continue to be concerned. My own dining room table is an example of such an exchange, in which the previous owner's daughter wanted to be sure we were appropriate future owners for her mother's cherished table before selling it to us.

In a small city in North Carolina, I met a young, recently engaged couple that had moved into the man's great-uncle Barrel's[9] house about a year before, and it was still full of his things. Rather than remove everything or put it into the storage areas of the house, Gillian and Michael chose to integrate his possessions with their own, as though he had never died and moved out. Neither of them knew him very well in life, but as they went through the labor of sorting through everything to make space for themselves, they felt they had come to know the previous tenants. Photos and other mementos of Uncle Barrel and Aunt Violet were placed lovingly around the house. Not only did they feel connected with these objects, they felt the presence of the former inhabitants on a daily basis and came to think of them as close kin. The sense of presence was increased by the fact that these objects were continually recontextualized by neighbors and family visiting the house and evaluating how Barrel would have appreciated the way they had rearranged the house or comparing their housekeeping. Gillian said, "so when I vacuum, I think about her! And when I'm doing things around the house, I think about her, and I'm like. . . . It feels like she's here." Gillian had even resized Barrel's wedding ring so

9. His nickname came from the rounded shape of his body, though embodying a container as he does makes him a provident source of spirit in this paper.

that Michael could wear it once they were married, and Barrel's army uniform still hung in the living room closet. Objects that are passed between people, even people who don't know each other very well, carry an affective history with them, even if this history is largely imagined. The point is that these objects continue to vibrate semiotically with these former associations, and that older meanings are continually revived and invigorated by their new users, sometimes even to the point that a former owner seems to remain present within the space.

By contrast, used things are often avoided precisely because of the possibility of such traces. Chloe, a young woman in her early 20s explained that she couldn't bear to have any used objects in her house—she felt the presence of others and was especially uncomfortable about objects associated with dead people. Indeed, the contents of her house were not only immaculate but absolutely devoid of personal history or expression. By contrast, in her parents' home, a Victorian filled with antiques and family heirlooms, she found her skin crawling with the discomforting presence of death. She struggled with these feelings, knowing that they would be perceived as irrational: "I don't like having anything of theirs in my house. Like, that was theirs, things that have been passed down—it creeps me out. Because [in my parent's house] we have a chair that belonged to my uncle who died. I just don't like it. So I won't sit in it . . ."

For the same reason she had refused to accept the guitar of her closest friend from his parents after he committed suicide. In other words, the minimalists or "purgers" among us are not any more free from feelings of presence amongst objects than the hoarders. Similar principles were at work when a divorcée in her 40s ridded her home of every object that had been purchased during her time with the man in question—every kitchen tool, bath towel, and piece of furniture bore his trace and had to be replaced. Although she remained attached to her deceased dog's toys and presents from her brother, she felt that the experience had left her lighter and free from a need for many personal possessions.

It is important that none of the objects discussed here work as symbols in the classic Saussurian sense of something that arbitrarily and collectively encodes a meaning. It is the objects that speak, even when their voices are not wanted. Walter Benjamin wrote of the relationship between semiotics and materiality that, "There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents" (Benjamin 1996: 62) . . . "Language is thus the mental being [*geistige Wesen*] of things" (66). As Bracken points out, the phrase could have been translated as "spirit-being," since *Geist* not only means mind but also spirit and even ghost, or as Kant put it "the animating principle of the mind" (Bracken 2007: 138–39). Benjamin's perspective that objects have spirits that circulate in human communication corresponds to the Ivoirian theory of the double, in which not only people but all animals and material things have a spirit-double in the second world. Thus just as the Ivoirian conception of spirit possession is one in which an external spirit temporarily displaces one's double and takes control of the corporeal human form (Newell 2007, 2013), one can think of possessed objects as having their *geist*-being replaced by an external spiritual agency that inhabits them.

Possessions themselves can become bodies through which spirit takes on material form and engage the physical world. Furthermore, Ivoirian spirit is partially

material: by consuming the double of things in the second world, a body in the first world can become both powerful and corpulent—whereas to have one's double consumed by witches will lead to an inevitable if unpredictable death in the first world, such as a car accident or emaciating disease. It is in this space of the imaginary that some Ivoirian objects take on spirit dwellers and therefore magical efficacy, and it is in the unspoken imaginary of storage space (the space of haunting par excellence) that US possessions can absorb spirit and become inalienable social things. Thus the spirit-being of the thing is the intersubjective space of semiotic accretion and social contestation through which meaning is ever made and unmade.

While in consumption theory possessions are typically thought of as "extensions of the self" under the control of their master (Belk 1988), it is worth considering the reverse possibility, in which the spirits of things also get ahold of us and refuse to let go. It is in this sense that they objects assert their claim to "belonging" as members of the household, even when sequestered out of the space of sociality. As a mathematics professor I interviewed once told me, "Once it gets its hooks in you it's hard you know? You can't get rid of it if it's got a story now, can you? You know because then you might lose that piece of the story." Things thus have agency not merely in the Latourian sense of resisting our efforts at cultural mastery but also in the sense that they engage us socially, obligating us to treat them in specific ways.

The residual semiotics of the unfetish

That people felt the presence of beings in many of the things they kept was ethnographically undeniable. But this raises the question of how spirit gets into objects and which kinds of objects absorb such personhood, especially in a society that denies this possibility. Recalling Valeri's assertion about the residues of persons and events giving objects a unique irreplaceable status, it behooves us to remember that is precisely through such residues that Frazer's contagious magic operates, incorporating fingernail clippings, hair, buttons, and so forth into charms that operate upon their unsuspecting victims. The mimetic copy too works to draw or direct the actions of spiritual agency through a performative image "making," and all but a handful of my participants said that if they could only keep one thing it would be their photographs, indicating the ongoing presence-making capacity of the image. Through unsolicited semiotic associations of iconicity and indexicality, personhood enters into the object, haunts it even. But note that as in Benjamin's assertions about the mental life of objects, these semiotic operations are not some kind of human code projected by the mind on a passive material world. Indeed, in the North Atlantic context the association of causal efficacies with semiotic connections is distinctly repudiated and the associations are not even always clearly articulated by their owners. Rather there is a kind of interface between the durable presence of materialities and the mobile worlds they encounter, whereby the qualia of the object itself directs its apperception into human sociality even as humans latch onto nearby material forms to contain the flux of memory through their residues in durable recipients.

In attempting to tease out how unfetish objects are made powerful, I am moving toward the relationship between materiality and the space beyond encoded social

meaning, such that the possession of things becomes a means for semiotically connecting to what we might call the space of death (Taussig 1984), that is, the space beyond knowable experience. In fact, it might be the very invisible uncategorizability of residual rubbish (Thompson 2003) that makes it so efficacious, drawing upon the space of the unseen and shadowy spaces lurking around the corners of public order to draw new associations and bind things together. David Todd Doris' recent ethnography *Vigilant things* (2011) on Yoruban antitheft "devices" gives us particular insight into the connection between efficacious charms and residual possessions: residual in the double sense that they are valueless, used up things and that they have absorbed personal residue from their former owners. *Ààlè* are a specific class of things made to protect personal possessions from thieves. What initially caught Doris' attention was the almost dadaesque construction of the *ààlè* out an assortment of seemingly cast off detritus of everyday life—including worn out shoes, rusty spoons, rags, dried corn cobs, and seed pods. These used up things, the use-value literally consumed out of them, were actually richly symbolic and "full" of spiritual presence and power. This collection of rubbish had typically been consumed (used up) by the *ààlè* makers themselves, and was thus intimately bound to their former owners, metonymic extensions of their being. As former (now useless) possessions they now stood guard over the valued present possessions of the owner.

At the same time, the way in which they had been used up stood iconically for what would happen to the thief who transgressed their power. The worn out shoe transparently conveyed to a thief versed in this semiotic that they would be ground into the dirt repeatedly under the foot of the owner until worn down into nothing. A ritual specialist named Fágbade explains of his *ààlè* composed of a shoe, a rag, a broom, and a comb that

> A person in poverty will wear rags and worn-out shoes. Olódùmarè [a deity] has not allowed the suffering this shoe has experienced to come upon me. The shoe has stepped on the shit of goats and human beings. It has trekked the town until suffering has reduced it to this condition. Cloth is also used until it becomes a rag and torn. We know also that suffering has reduced this broom to what it is now. The broom can be used to sweep any place: it will sweep the toilet and sweep where we urinate. And the comb, on its own—the issue of suffering never departs from it. (Doris 2011: 52–53)

Fágbade speaks of the subjective experience of suffering from the perspective of the objects themselves, a suffering that has indexically become a part of their being and that can now be transferred to a thief that ignores this warning sign. By bringing together these elements and suspending the artful combination from a string somewhere the thief is likely to see them, the object furthermore communicates its intentionality. Each of these objects, harmless on their own, when combined make legible the inner qualities and threat they contain. Doris writes that the creative energy put into this concatenation creates a dynamic relationship between the owner, the object, and the thief. Unfetish activity is thus at once an accumulation and projection of personhood, drawing together the remnants and detritus, the dividual offshoots of each objects social relations to produce its own interdynamic vital energy. Sometimes it is in the unforeseen juxtapositions of storage space that

new self-awareness begins, as when I was helping Mary, a young, recently married business professional, to pare down her storage unit (1 of 4). She came across a note from her best friend in junior high, someone she had lost touch with close to fifteen years ago. Suddenly she was digging through the "throw away" pile to find a cassette she had previously discarded without a thought. She at that moment recalled that she and her friend had recorded letters to each other in the year after she moved out of town, and soon we were crouching by an old boom box in rapt embarrassment listening to their teenage musings on family, and school, and boys.

People cannot resist storing all kinds of scraps of paper and detritus because they feel that they will lose the memory if they do not keep this impregnated material trace, a leftover piece of a singular event or person. Natasia's daughter had saved the candy wrappers from the last time she went trick-or-treating for Halloween in a decorative bottle that remained in her childhood room, alongside a cheap trinket she received the night of her first kiss. She saved a newspaper from every birthday she ever had, and wrapping paper from every present (though she had managed to condense this collection into a representative collage). Though her daughter was now in her late 20s and no longer lived in the house, Natasia dared not disrupt these collections as she tried to pack the house up to move. Natasia theorized that her daughter's obsessive relationship to such remnants came from the loss of all her personal possessions when the family emigrated from Russia with a 100 kilo weight limit for the entire family. The daughter had revealed to her therapist that she still thinks longingly about the treasured toys that she had to leave behind, as though she was still trying to replace these relations she had lost long ago. But Natasia herself had several large plastic tubs full of such scraps of paper, going back to hand-drawn notes from the night of her wedding, a marriage long since ended. She and I knelt in front of the box enchanted by these scraps as her rainy-day garage sale downstairs was left abandoned for over an hour. As Jonathan Culler noted, "One may secretly hope that if one has enough junk, the past it marks will become truly memorable. There is at least, a feeling that if we throw out this junk we are being disrespectful to the past it memorializes" (1985: 5). While Culler suggests that such worthless tokens are the spurious souvenirs through which we construct the past as an authentic original, there is a more radical possibility—that we actually store memory in things, like a kind of analog hard drive. That by throwing away such memory objects we might lose access to rich indeterminacy of memories that have not been completely encoded in linguistic narratives. If we follow Andy Clark and David Chalmers' argument that human cognition makes use of external material tools such as calculators and computers as extensions of the brain for basic cognitive processes (Clark and Chalmers 1998), the attic could be considered a technology for the extension of memory, working to "think" outside of our own heads. This seems especially true of more diffuse experiences that have no particular narrative associated with them but may nevertheless contain powerful moments of affective awareness and interconnection. The object can restore complex bundles of perception and affect that were never clearly encoded into words.

Melanie, a former musician in her late fifties who now worked in a small freelance company, was busy sorting through a living room stacked almost six feet high in cardboard boxes that belonged to her recently deceased mother, and that included family papers going back to the 1800s, an obligation passed on to her with

quite explicit instructions from her mother, who had left notes throughout her possessions about their meaning, provenance, and destination after her demise. But it was what she had to say about a simple bird's-eye maple kitchen table covered in potted violets that really illustrates the relationship between things and memory:

> My father's family were coal miners, steel mill workers—they didn't have much. But that was the kitchen table in the farmhouse where I remember, as a little kid, having breakfast with my grandparents. Now, he died when I was very small. Grandmother lived to be 96. She moved with her daughters all over the country, but that table ended up with me, so that'll never go anywhere. Don't care about the chairs—it's the table. When I touch it, I remember those mornings with my aunt holding the coffee pot in her lap, and the morning that I thought—I was a little girl, eight, and I wanted a pony so bad—and I looked up at the kitchen window, and there was a pony standing there. I was absolutely sure it was for me. It wasn't. But instead of my heart breaking, it put magic into the object—the table.

Pietz's invocation of Leiris on the fetish comes closest to describing this kind of personal engagement with materiality: "moments when the outside seems abruptly to respond to the sum of what we throw forth from within, when the exterior world opens to encounter our heart and establishes a sudden communication with it" (Pietz 1985: 12).[10] Leiris describes a particular kind of memory that is at once valueless and of limitless value, without symbolic meaning. As Pietz argues, these *crises* each bring together an unrepeatable moment with a material object. But while I agree that these are not symbolic objects, their relationship to memory makes them clearly semiotic, as becomes clear in his own characterization of the fetish as a "material space gathering an otherwise unconnected multiplicity into the unity of its enduring singularity" (1985: 15). It is the tactile materiality of the object that allows for this aggregation of semiotic life, or what Heidegger calls the "gathering" of the Thing (Schwenger 2006: 28). Memories that serve to anchor selfhood and one's relationship to past are recalled through the medium of a thing that itself *witnessed* and absorbed that moment of the past. The durable materiality of the Thing becomes a fixative, binding together the flux and abstraction of experience into the concrete and localized. But these are not mere souvenirs that recall individual events and bind us to memories that might otherwise be lost. Unlike mere

10. Unfortunately, Pietz has also harnessed this idea of the singularity and contingency of "fetishes" to the misconception that these African spiritual objects were themselves encountered willy-nilly and transformed into a fetish to record that unique moment. Bosman claimed he was told by his Ouidan informant that when someone needed to do something important, they would go outside, and "take the first creature that presents it self to our Eyes, whether Dog, Cat, or the most contemptible Animal in the World, for our God; or perhaps instead of that any Inanimate that falls in our way, whether a stone, a piece of Wood, or any thing else of the same Nature" (Pietz 1985: 8). Aside from the patronizing tone, MacGaffey argues that the Congolese *nkisi* (1994: 126–27), objects were often presented to their owners by the spirit who was seeking adoption (just as mediums are often chosen against their will by spirits), and the heterogenous elements included in the belly cavity followed careful and elaborate rules paying special attention to codified metaphorical and metonymic associations.

memory objects, unfetish things contain an element of the intersubjective, binding the consciousness to something greater than itself and producing the kind of moral obligation that stems from social relationships.

Objects as relations: The sociality of kin-things

Many people find themselves unable to discard objects out of a feeling of obligation to the object itself. Anne, a recent college graduate living in a cramped and cluttered one-bedroom apartment that smelled strongly of cat pee, had vintage suitcases scattered decoratively about her living room. She began to open these for me, showing that each was filled with a random assortment of objects. One contained among assorted oddities an old RF modulator, a license plate, and a ceramic cherubic angel with a wing broken off—the latter, given to her by a teacher for good behavior, was designated as one of her three most cherished possessions. Such a juxtaposition of highly valued goods with actual rubbish is a classic pattern for the accumulations of unmonitored storage space, probably an effect of being kept in liminal space outside of meaningful frames of reference. She had difficulty articulating why she kept many of these things:

> I don't know. I mean, obviously the things that were my grandmother's I love, because they were hers. And not even so much that the actual card was hers, but just that it was of a place where she grew up, and I love that. . . . But those silly, like, photographs and things that are not ones that are particularly, like, significant to me—they're just kind of things I had—I don't know, it feels like you're sort of throwing away a person. Throwing away that memory and that's . . . [wrong]. On my fridge, I have a picture of my friend's baby that's incredibly old. The kid's now—it's from when it was a newborn, and the kid's now thirty—and I cannot get rid of that picture, because you can't throw away a baby! (Laughs) That seems terrible!

In such testaments, we see the very logic that causes accumulation to lose control in many households, as well as the motivation for those who purge their house of sentimental objects. Things that are associated with people, either through resemblance or contact, often cannot be discarded because it feels as though one is throwing away the person or the experience itself. But while the semiotic accretions produced Anne's need to hold onto things, it was not that she saved these objects for the people they represented, nor even to satisfy her own memories, but rather because it felt morally wrong—it was the personhood of the object itself that she could not throw away.

Melanie again provides a quite direct analysis of her feelings for the personhood of things:

> Do the objects have feelings? I know I treat them as such. I talk to the grandfather clock. He seems quite happy here. . . . So we've had that thing since the 30s in our family, and we always refer to him as "he." The moose is [also] "he." . . . I like him because when I was a little girl, visiting grandma and grandpa, my little bed where I slept was right under the moose. So I've known him since I was a girl. You get so attached.

Note that in this family certain objects were addressees, and being treated as members of the group in this way led to them taking on third person pronouns. Following one of Nurit Bird-David's finer points about animism, when people engage in relationships with things other than humans, they "make relatives by sharing with them and thus making them persons" (1999: S73). Interestingly, this empathy for the feelings of objects (such as the happiness of clock) are precisely the kinds of sentiments hoarders often describe concerning objects in their lives. Gail Steketee and Randy Frost quote a recovered hoarder discussing her struggle with throwing away a yogurt container:

> I remember feeling bad about not choosing "this" particular container as one that would remain at home with the others, and so I was feeling responsible for rejecting it and placing it in to the recycling bin to begin its long journey to eventual destruction. I felt responsible for giving it as comfortable a ride as possible, seeing as how I was rejecting it, and the thought of it having to endure a humid, long journey made me very anxious. (Steketee and Frost 2010: 273)

Clearly this "container" held more than mere yogurt. Beneath its plastic logos resided another entity, one that by virtue of the very act of possession had taken on the role of relatedness, a coinhabitant of the house that she was forced to exclude from her intimate collectivity. As Michael Silverstein suggested (pers. comm.), there might be something to the very semiotics of possession, especially when articulated with kinship relations, that produces a "non-cancellable" or "rigid" indexicality making the object inalienable in just the way that kinship terminology renders certain people related regardless of volition.

In *Minima ethnographica*, Jackson argues of Kuranko fetishes that they have the opposite efficacy of a gift—that while gifts open and forge intersubjective connections, the fetish binds, encloses, and protects a space of intimacy (1998: 75–82). He lists a set of fetishlike objects kept in a locked box under a Firawa friend's bed: a padlock with pages of Koranic verse folded and wrapped around it that was used to render an opponent immobile and speechless through the locking action. Similarly, a rope with a knotted end that one tightens while saying the name of someone one desires tongue-tied and bound. Another device was placed over the threshold to keep enemies from entering an interior domestic space. Jackson argues that the (un)fetish is an active embodiment of human consciousness, an extension of personhood that exerts subjective influence and binding control over intersubjective space-time (Munn 1992) even in the absence of its maker.

These fixative affordances of stored objects to capture intersubjective relations may have become a crucial mode of sociality in the contemporary United States, as neolocal residence and neoliberal employment practices regularly disperse families and make face-to-face relatedness increasingly difficult to maintain, except through nontactile techno-panacea of social media. Such spirited things seem to hover around kin relationships in a social world where spatial proximity and intergenerational intimacy have become luxuries only the most elite can afford—though as in Carol Stack's classic (1974) the most impoverished also rely on such sociality to survive. Indeed, the socio-legal requirement to sort out the objects of the dead and redistribute them to dispersed family members has become a not-insignificant

means of reactivating overextended kin relations and sealing them through the connective tissue of things that obligate (though it can also operate as wedge driving apart factions formerly held together only by their bond to the deceased). In both cases it is the sheer material weight that forces moral interaction with real social repercussions.

Bea, a middle-aged woman who lived alone in a gorgeous bungalow in the historic part of town in a house filled with antiques, had become the self-appointed custodian of her family's history. She had spent the most time of any of her siblings in her family home and took care of her mother when she was dying, and so because she had the closest relationship to the *things* in that home she became the one responsible for them: "I am a steward of it. It is stuff that has—that was important to the generation before me; it's important to me; by golly it's going to be important to my niece and nephew." She found herself responsible for reuniting sets of china that had been split apart in former generations, as well as divvying up other objects, some of them to people who didn't necessarily want them.

> I had to deal with sorting her estate and . . . bringing sets, as I was telling you, back together. You know, doing distributions for my cousins. And so in that process, we reconnected. . . . This is the same family as the cousin who said, "Well, I don't really want the loveseat." Sal, irrelevant! You, sister, are going to have it!

But Bea's intense relationship to her possessions was built on more than her feeling of responsibility to the humans in her family: "There are certain things that you keep and you have taken care of because they're *in your family*" (my emphasis). This is why Bea's cousin Sally had no choice but to become the caretaker of the loveseat, whether she wanted to or not. Certain objects take on a collective importance greater than the individual desires of people to whom they belong, carrying with them familial obligation and becoming the very fabric of how family reproduces itself over time. Tragically, in many families when no one has the kind of moral force Bea seems to have over her kin, the moment of divestment is fraught with efforts to self-ancestralize by finding someone to take over and cherish belongings whose deeper resonance may not be communicable to people who no longer cohabit with such objects (Marcoux 2001). As Jean-Sébastien Marcoux elegantly writes, for those who succeed in passing along their belongings before or after death, a sense of continuity and ongoing relatedness is established, as though their former possessions were progeny who might reproduce the self after its corporeal absence.

Hidden belongings

Although in the United States some kin-objects stand as proud heirlooms in public spaces of living and dining rooms, such "durables" tend to have a provenance in the established capital that allows for the maintenance of stable kin relations, or even in some cases enforces it for the sake of holding the wealth intact. Though many people had one or two such things, public objectivations of kinship were relatively rare compared to the proliferation of such objects in storage, and I suggest that there

may be a link between concealment and binding such that certain kinds of fragile relations dissolve when exposed to the light of public ideologies. In other words, since objects are "not supposed" to have "objective" capacities of personhood they cannot do the work of kinship in public, except when they have enough market or aesthetic value to justify their presence. Those who do live in public collectivities that include objects like this are often viewed with suspicion or even accused of borderline hoarding mentality by their peers.

But returning to the concept of container, concealment itself can be the source of efficacy. Despite the fetish's habit of eluding practically every effort at characterization, Valeri writes that "there is something relatively uniform in the way they are preserved and treated: they are very often packaged up, wrapped up in material, hidden . . . the gaze in some way impeded" ([1979] 2001: 29). Blocking the gaze produces a space of the unseen that is ripe with the capacity of the unknown, while at the same time preventing the exposure of such intimate and ambiguous connectivity between the self and an invisible world of relations. Unfetish objects are often secreted away, tucked into the folds of clothing or stuffed into the straw of a thatch roof. Sanasi, a *nouchi* player in Treichville, once became very serious when I asked him about magic. He was always dressed in urban style with clean, new jeans, t-shirt, and baseball cap and his comportment was one of urban savvy and fear-no-one toughness, so I was surprised when, looking about anxiously to make sure no one was looking, he pulled up his shirt to reveal several leather wrapped bundles strapped around his body. He explained they were for protection, grinning at the memory of when he had strapped these charms to a goat and asked tourists to shoot at it, demonstrating its bulletproof magic when they all missed.

Unfetishes represent the hidden, invisible connections of relatedness radiating through the community and secretly structuring sociality. The witchfinding movements that periodically ransack villages across many regions of Africa are focused upon revealing these hidden forces buried in people's private space (Smith 2005; Auslander 1993), much as a North Americans may try to purge their homes of objects whose psychic weight and cluttered material presence they can no longer bear. Indeed, the new class of "professional organizers" perform tasks remarkably like that of witchfinders, systematically (and publicly, in the case of reality television) overturning the contents of a home to reveal its irrational interiority and expel the unfetishes that have no place within Euro-American ontology. But from another perspective, concealment is not only the central function of storage space, it is the invisibility of stored things that allows its efficacy as a space of personal attachment and intersubjective connectivity to emerge. At the same time, it is only by periodically entering this hidden space and rearranging its contents, bringing some back out and relegating other formerly displayed objects to oblivion that the human owner makes contact with and appreciates the sociality of these things (Gregson 2011).

There is something liminal about the set apart storage of the house, a space quite literally associated with the space of death as the clichéd connection between haunting and attics attests. As a space outside of public social categories, it exists but as a disconnected world that is unseen, and its very invisibility gives it the potency of the mask that takes on otherworldly life precisely because one cannot visually determine the human presence within. Graeber (2001) describes the concealed value as the site of hoarded capacity for action, as opposed to adornment in

which the actor persuades those around them to action through dazzling displayed wealth. But what is most interesting is the way these categories slide into one another, as when Malagasy magic beads and coins worn as adornments to bring a desired future to fruition were when successfully transformed into hidden charms that were conduits to invisible sources of power.

What becomes important then is to trace the slide between the visible displays of commodities in public into increasingly personal possessions used in intimacy, ending in the concealed and seemingly worthless goods that cannot be discarded despite their lack of market value.

The topological perspective on containers helps conceptualize these transformations. In Mark Mosko's seminal account of the Mekeo cosmology, the "abdomen of a human being is homologously conceived as inside the body only insofar as it is an inversion of space outside the body" (1985: 27): waste that collects there is already outside. Similarly, rubbish in the Mekeo village is swept into the center plaza of the village (an inverted outside) before being carried to the bush on the edge of the village (an everted inside). In this sense, the movement of things from storage to public space and back thus interconnects the inverted outside of the attic with the everted inside of domestic public space, the objects themselves being externalizations of internal states and internalizations of alien matter into subjective projects of self-construction. If as Marilyn Strathern writes, in Melanesian reciprocal exchange "the external other actually takes one's externalized inside into his own inside" ([1998] 2013: 201), then here I am tracing how such exchanges happen in the social relations between persons and their possessions.

Commodity unfetishism

One might think that there is an obvious difference between the unfetish objects in West Africa and the agentive things in North American attics; the former are intentionally constructed things with magical agency, whereas the latter are objects that absorb personhood of their own accord and defy the ideological separation of persons and things. But in fact these two categories bleed into one another, making them much harder to distinguish than would first appear. For the African charm is constructed out of used up things, encountered things, personal detritus, in fact, of the very kinds of things that make their way so mysteriously into US storage space. And most of the objects found in American attics were once themselves commodities constructed with the precise aim of charming their way off the store shelf and into a shopper's hands. It is in the second life of commodities as possessions that they gradually lose their "image" resonance (their "brand" value) and take on greater and greater indexical value.

While Marx famously argued that capitalist society misrecognizes the human activity behind the value of commodities and sees instead social relationships between things, from a perspective that focuses on semiotic ideologies, the value of commodities is woven from metaphoric association with the lives of other similarly branded goods, visibly consumed by mediated celebrities as well as local friends and associates one emulates (McCracken 1988 2005). Indeed, like African charms, they were manufactured and marketed precisely with the charming effects of

affecting presence in mind. Marx's misrecognition of commodities does of course take place, as the indexical connections of commodities to their origination in human labor and particular structures of social relations *are* erased in favor of these glamorous and largely artificially produced iconic qualities of the object in relation to famous celebrity consumers and what Naomi Klein has referred to as the "spirit" of the brand, a kind of metaphorical personhood or lifestyle manufactured around the brand concept that often carries far more value than the material assets of the company producing them (Klein 2000: 7). Value is specified at the level of mimetic images metaphorically transferred rather than tangible contact—the plastic packaging surrounding a product is after all a guarantee that no person has physically come in contact with the product (a further erasure of the human process of manufacture). The consumer even feels discomfort purchasing an object whose packaging has been compromised. Thus the semiotic ideology of US consumption is primarily organized around the public display of iconicity.

But I am most interested in what happens when the packaging comes off, initiating physical and affective contact between the possession and person. The glamorous preconstructed metaphoric relations of the "product" are gradually overdubbed by the metonymic accretion of everyday associations with persons and experiences the object comes in contact with. These often become the most central source of an object's value for their owners and inheritors over time, as its market value is almost inevitably reduced to junk status (at least for a time). Nor should we consider these processes to belong solely to North Atlantic markets, and we find similar cases of this process of conversion from commodity to possession to unfetish in Africa. We have already seen examples of how postconsumer rubbish takes on new life just at the moment when it loses all value as a commodity, incorporated into magical objects to draw upon their subjective experiences and the intense personhood they have absorbed from former possessors. More research must be done into the intermediate phases of possession, but evidence of similar forms of consumer possessions taking on unfetish qualities is there for the finding in existent ethnography. Adeline Masquelier (2001) describes for example the strong association of a person with her possessions in Mawri society, such that when pregnant women die before childbirth, "the women's belongings (clothes, cooking pots, or mats) had to be buried with them. Otherwise, they would forever haunt their families to reclaim the possessions from which they had been separated. I was told that if only a sewing needle was forgotten or given away to a neighbor or a relative, the dead woman would come back for it, needlessly scaring the entire village" (2001: 247). Typically such misfortune was the fault of the mother, whose indulgent overconsumption of sugar (symbolic of foreign commodities) had blocked her cervix, and her improper burial led to the production of dangerous "Maria" spirits that possessed Mawri women and often drove them into prostitution. What is fascinating is such spirits could be successfully contained, so long as every commodity associated with her was buried with her in a grave separated from the regular cemetery.

Still more apropos is an article under development by Katrien Pype, who has been studying the broken radios and other defunct technology owned by older Kinshasans. She writes of one informant who had years ago been given a luxurious radio by his grandmother. Even though it no longer worked

> Papa Toma swore he would keep this radio until he died. As he claimed, cherishing the radio meant respecting the memory of his grandmother and of his ancestors—as his grandmother was a paramount chief. He was worried though that his children might "neglect" the radio once he would die. (Pype, n.d.)

There was a great temptation to sell the radio or even its parts, and in some cases Pype found that children had done so against the will of their parents, but many like Papa Toma did their best to preserve it against such destructive forces. Here we see a precise parallel to the spirit life of commodities I have been describing in this article, in which an object becomes valued according to its past, to the *hau* it has built up along its path. In Pype's stories the objects are proudly maintained in public space as heirlooms rather than concealed, but of course in urban African space there is very little space for stored things and too much demand for used goods to allow the inertia of stored things to get to the point of overwhelming social actors. Still, more ethnographic evidence of stored valuables, perhaps most especially in urban realms where there are both more readily available commodities and less space to keep them, will be important ground for further ethnographic investigation.

Conclusion: The matter of *mana*

The material "container" of the sign (even spoken words are material patterns of acoustic vibration) carries a bundle of qualia not directly associated with their intended meaning, and these can in turn affect the outcome of semiosis in unexpected and often uncontrollable ways. My interest in the semiotic life of objects does not imply a subjection of materiality to human subjectivity, for it is often the thing itself that arrests the subject with its sensorial presence in the first place. Semiosis is integrated into the very process of sensory reception and the communicative functions of the nervous system, and signs have real world efficacy in their ability to shape physical and mental reactions to sensory perception. In the chiasmatic "fold" between sensory perception and recognition lie semiotic pathways through which the vibrancy of things and the currents of collective representation mesh with one another in unpredictable ways. Thus the opposition new materialists make between "materiality" and "semiotics" is actually a reproduction of the very naturalist divide they claim to be escaping, as though by retreating entirely to "nature" they have overcome the divide itself.

On the one hand the fixity, specificity, and location of objects in time and space are essential to the objectification of consciousness that allows not only publicly shared meaning but also self-recognition. On the other hand, the very materiality of objects is infinite in its specificity. Francis Ponge describes the material object as an abyss that opens up as soon as one fixes attention on it in hopes of finding stability: "One attentively regards the pebble in order not to see the rest. Now it comes about that the pebble gapes in its turn, and also becomes a precipice. . . . No matter what object, it's enough to want to describe it, it opens itself up in turn, it becomes an abyss" (Schwenger 2006: 28). It is recognition of this "abyss" yawning between

materiality and its representation that allows any object to connect to the space beyond language—it only takes a moment of intimate mutual apperception, as when Jane Bennett encounters a pile of debris caught in a storm drain in Baltimore and for some reason unknown to herself was transfixed, having "caught a glimpse of the energetic vitality inside each of these things" (2010: 5).

This shiftiness in our encounter with "vibrant matter" is at the origin of an object's animate agency. Like the magical efficacy of *mana* (Siegel 2004; Lévi-Strauss 1987), the unfetish takes on spectral qualities because its force comes from beyond the inherent limitations of signification but unlike mana, the unfetish is material, locked into the specificity of space and time, its stability a kind of reservoir to affix recollection. Through a combination of enduring sensuous concreteness and vibrating hollowness, some objects take on the role of semiotic magnets that draw in and absorb memories, persons, deities, other times, and places and hold them like external memory drives.

Having described the shocking explosion of a Georgian sheep intended for sacrifice (and ritual consumption) that had unintentionally been soaked in gasoline, Paul Manning and Anne Meneley (2008) point the way to understanding relationship between materiality and the social agency of the unfetish in their use of Webb Keane's bundling of qualisigns in the object, arguing that

> The sensuous qualities of objects imbricated in field of specifically religious meanings often allow the same objects to participate in other non-religious fields of meaning simultaneously. The object becomes, via the qualisigns that allow it to participate in different fields of meaning, a kind of condominium that is a potential zone of conflict as these different cosmological fields seek to establish unique sovereignty over that object. (2008: 287)

The unfetish is not merely a dwelling for a spirit but a condominium of qualities, making it unconquerable by efforts at symbolic definition—there is always a residue that resists representation, a residue that is augmented by partial concealment suggestive of something undiscoverable. The materiality of a thing bubbling beyond the bounds of human determination, becoming the site for competing sovereignties and registers of value is at the heart of how things take on a life of their own.

Descola's portrait of the "Mandé and Voltaic" ancestor sculpture as "an eminent agent of the life of the collective" points toward the nexus between indexical chains of significance, the fixity of matter, and the inscrutable mobility of the multitude.

> The statue is not a symbol or an emblem but indeed a "little person," that is, an artifact inhabited by a human who is neither completely dead nor fully alive, and endowed because of this with an agency of his own in spite of his apparent immobility. But this is an agency of which only the effects—whether prophylactic, vindicatory, or reparatory—are perceptible by those they affect, a means to give credit to a presence by the result it generates. The best way to ascribe this disposition to the effigy is thus to treat it according to an externalist approach, as an eminent agent of the life of the collective; for . . . these indexes, prominent in a medley of other indexes, offer to the gaze, in the darkness of the chamber of powers, the chain of affinities which bestows dynamism and substance to collective life. (Descola 2013b: 44)

The sociality of the unfetish is not unlike a practice in Côte d'Ivoire in which a coffin suddenly begins to drag around its pallbearers, carrying them as fast as they can move around the village until it encounters the hut of the witch that terminated the spirit's life like a giant and highly consequential Ouija board. This kind of animate agency is beyond the control of any human actor involved, a hybrid of uncharted Deleuzian becoming and Durkheimian "social current" made manifest in the personal life of the object. The very materiality of the unfetish in which humans seek fixity makes this indeterminacy possible; the richly bundled, potentially infinite qualities of the thing make its semiotic possibilities beyond social control but at the same time constitutive of sociality.

So to return to the question of how the fetish concept became a means to project our own irrationality onto overdetermined others, when did North Atlantic societies lose a culturally explicit place for the personhood of things? Perhaps as North Atlantic societies became immersed within the capitalist market, indexical associations with personhood had to be ideologically cut out of the recognition of object value, because it interferes with the process of commoditization and fungible exchangeability of practically everything. Rather than commodities representing a "fetishistic" confusion of persons and things, one might say that it was the encroaching ideological radical separation of persons and things, the "Great Divide" that progressively masked the commodification of human labor through which capitalist hierarchy was built.

As late as the end of the nineteenth century, unfetish objects were given a respectful place within historic sites and cabinets of curiosities (Stewart 1993; Pels 1998). Teresa Barnett's history of *Sacred relics* (2013) describes how nineteenth-century American tourists, by sitting in the chair where Napoleon had once ruled, or the looking through spyglass Washington used to examine the countryside, or seeing themselves in William Penn's mirror, would achieve contact with historical subjectivity. As a sign on Penn's chair encouraged, "Fruitful Of Recollections—Sit And Muse" (2013: 68). This was not, Barnett tells us, a case of reenactment of history but rather a kind of "inner apprehension" through kinesthesia. Echoing the language of Pietz's fetish encounter, Barnett describes how lovers at the moment of parting might exchange whatever random object came to hand:

> A particular bit of foliage or an item in a pocket was drafted as a token because it happened to be available, but its chance availability at just that time also meant it was indissolubly tied to that moment and served as its marker. Geranium leaves connected Kate Stone and her husband-to-be and also anchored the heightened emotional moment of their parting in a time-specific configuration of the physical world, preserving that moment through its material trace. (Barnett 2013: 59)

It was only at the end of the nineteenth century that discourse surrounding museums began to counter an indexical approach to objects (characterized as "sentimental," even "feminine"), seeking to collect things that were iconic or "typical" of a historical time period rather than specific mementos of historical events. Thus, at a 1910 meeting of the American Association of Museums historical relics were written off as "fetishes" good for little more than "idle sentimentality" (Barnett

2013: 167), and so indexicality was barred from the world of rational thinkers in favor of the hyperreal of mimetic reproduction.

Nevertheless, many US subjects have gone on silently feeling as though certain kinds of things have a different kind of value akin to the Maori concept of *hau*, a deep-seated personhood that grants such objects membership and agency within our social lives. They find themselves unable to articulate these feelings within any kind of "rational" framework provided by the explicit ontology of so-called modern societies. Thus they increasingly secrete our personal and personified objects behind closed doors, accumulating things they cannot rationally recognize within their closets, attics, basements, garages, and storage units, often at great cost. Their cultural fascination with "hoarding" indicates it is more than a mental illness but rather a general social process produced by a cosmological order that shuts out understanding of fundamental modes of human sociality. Pietz documented the *fetisso*'s cross-cultural utility during the social chaos of the European slave trade's incursion into West Africa, when few social forms could be relied upon to guarantee or "bind" value. Perhaps the accumulation of rubbish and corresponding escalation of the storage industry in the United States are the product of a similarly fungible society, in which a general process of commodification has increasingly encroached upon our very ability to construct and maintain human relations—leaving people grasping at their remnants in the form of old, often used-up things that speak of absent people and events. Spirit matter is the semiotic magic through which we maintain a semblance of belonging in a social world (even if it is locked away in storage) by cohabiting with belongings that belong not only to us, but with us.

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La substance de l'anti-fétiche: De la syllogomanie et de l'esprit des biens

Résumé : Dans cet article, j'ai recours à des idées ouest-africaines concernant la matière possédée pour repenser la sémiotique de la possession dans les sociétés nord-atlantiques. J'étudie ce sujet par une ethnographie du stockage—ces choses maintenues hors de la vue et inutilisées dans les greniers, les sous-sols, les placards et les garde-meubles. Les choses stockées forment une catégorie résiduelle de détritus animés que la société américaine pathologise souvent comme une accumulation "compulsive" ou "syllogomane" lorsqu'elle fait son apparition dans l'espace visible du foyer ou du petit écran. Je fais l'hypothèse que le concept de fétichisme est désespérément lié à la ligne de clivage "naturaliste" du rationalisme occidental et à la dichotomie entre les personnes et les choses, et soutiens que les objets typiquement désignés comme fétiches ne font pas l'objet d'un fétichisme mais reflètent plutôt une cosmologie d'entités matérielles contenant le fétiche. En construisant un modèle ethnographique de l'anti-fétiche en Afrique de l'ouest, je parcours la socialité des possessions en tant que biens qui nous tiennent et nous appartiennent.

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