

Territorialities: Home Range

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One way of thinking about the meaning of the home or home range is by considering what comprises a home, what things people feel are important or precious in the domains they create for themselves. I begin by reading some writing about possessions held in homes over many years. These objects are often wedding presents:

I still have my mother's tea-pot intact. I cannot accurately describe it. I'm told that it is black basalt, and has a design of pink, white and blue flowers in relief, interspersed with a gold design of leaves etc. It is valuable to me because mother valued it, it was only used on high days and holidays. The rest of the time it reposed on the mantel piece as a receptacle for savings. One of mother's brothers gave it to her as a wedding present (C115).

I have the hand-painted 'tea service' which my Aunt, mother's eldest sister, gave her as a wedding present – This is a wild rose spray on 'Minton' china with a gold border – it is lovely and mother treasured it. It is kept in the old mahogany display cabinet mother had, and I have only used it once. The same Aunt painted a tea-set for my wedding present, but I lost five of the tea cups in an accident (M1395).

Most things have been in everyday use, but the more delicate things have been put out of reach of the children ... My mum had my Grandmother's wedding china. Her china was in use on special occasions. She didn't tell us it was her wedding china until my brother broke some (C411).

I knew they had a tiny coffee service because it is kept in our china cabinet and never used. They said they'd use it on their silver wedding anniversary, but my father died when they had been married only 16 years (G2769).

I would not part with the bone china teaset as it holds quite dear memories of the old couple who are now dead (S1383).¹

Objects bind us together. They hold the web of relationships that is a life. The example of a home life I offer here is that of families and, in particular, the mother-daughter relationships of matrilineal families. Of the many different things that are part of the everylife of such families, of their home or of their home range, I have gathered a small selection writings about china because it is common to so many

¹ The letters and numbers in brackets preserve the anonymity of writers involved in the Mass Observation project. Their writings are held in the Mass Observation Archive, based at The Keep, East Sussex, UK, <http://www.thekeep.info>. These commentaries are responses to a series of open-ended questions, a directive, sent in Autumn 1998 entitled Giving and Receiving Presents.

twentieth and twenty-first century homes. I could have selected another type, say textiles, but china provides a point of comparison and departure here. China is a compelling combination of durability and fragility. It does not deteriorate but is easily broken, a remarkably stable substance, which is also inflexible and therefore brittle. China will last for many, many years beyond the life of a family generation, if treated carefully. The power of the object seems to lie in its coherence and longevity; it is a metaphor and metonym for the family. It can connect the living to the dead. Objects exchanged between family members and kept in one of their homes establish continuities between households and between generations. Since such objects usually pass from older to younger generations, they establish continuities between the past and present of a family. If carefully preserved so that they last beyond the life of the giver, they create continuities between the dead and the living. They become precious, even sacred.

Some years ago, I undertook a study of china because it was a wedding present and studied wedding presents because they allowed me to consider people and things.² I was not, am not, especially interested in married households except as an example of home making in a consumer culture. My preoccupation with people and things is, in part, an investigation of the possibility of resistance to the inundation of things that make up consumer culture through those very things themselves. We have little else. Our everyday lives are bound up with things; human cultures are inseparably material cultures. I can give just two examples of this, relevant, I hope, to how even moments of reflection such as we are engaged in this Territorialities project. Firstly, as I write this paper as I have all my papers, articles and chapters, at a table upon which various members of my family have eaten their breakfast, coming and going with bowls and spoons, forgetting to clear away cereal packets and bottles of milk as they make their preparations for the outside world, a crossing of the threshold of private to public, domestic to urban. They gather up goods in the manner of assembling armour: tools for work, books, pens, paper for school or college and, most importantly, layers of clothing, always appropriately adapted. Most time is dedicated to making slight modifications to dress barely visible to me, recognisable to the wearer. I try to concentrate amongst the clutter, but is no wonder I end up writing the very things that surround me. In a much wider sense (and certainly beyond my

² They, and more, are examined in detail in a book length study: Louise Purbrick, *The Wedding Present: Domestic Life Beyond Consumption*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2007.

untidy table), the inseparability of intellectual and material worlds are part of an account of the incorporation of material culture into an inquiry about the home or, indeed, anything else.

Secondly, I inherited my Nan's things, some of my maternal grandmother's possessions: many were textiles (aprons, embroidered tablecloths, tray cloths) but some were cutlery: one box of spoons and another of knives and forks. They had never been used. I imagined that they had been wedding presents and had been kept for best, or just kept. My Nan, married before the Second World War, ran a humble and frugal home, practiced a thrifty and resourceful domesticity, one where daily balance between use and preservation was a type of guardianship which took no account of fashion or status. I decided to use her things, to honour her way of life, of respectfully taking up what you have to hand, keeping it carefully.

To practice a domestic life wherein some things are respected as the lives of others, indeed, are used or preserved in particular ways in order to honour the dead, is to recognise a power in an object. I practice this life as do the writers I cited at the start of this paper. This power of things may not be acknowledged discursively, that is, admitted authoritative statements about domestic life but it is done, practiced, lived, nevertheless. To recognise that material culture may be so precious, even sacred, perhaps cosmological, or more prosaically, affective, intentional, with agency could be interpreted as anti-Marxist critique of the commodity culture. It is not.

The Marxist critique of the commodity, and its subsequent development into a comprehensive and convincing analytical assault upon cultures of consumption rests upon the fact that the commodity cannot be redeemed from its state of alienation.³ Commodities are empty of all but market values; exchangeable for anything of momentarily equivalent, arbitrary and also empty value, such as money, they are alienated from the moment of being made. A past existence in production is expediently forgotten in the act of exchange but, even if remembered, there is no redemption in production. Commodities are formed through the calculated productive capacities of a labour force; the labour of those who comprise that force is measured to become as exchangeable and alienated as a commodity. The commodity is a disembodied form, which through repeated exchange has reproduced a pervasive culture of acquisition and loss. Commodity exchanges determine all other forms of

³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* Volume 1 [1867], Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976 and see for example, Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity, 1997.

exchange, including those between people beyond their place in production: relationships are commodified, the human condition standardised with only 'the freedom to choose what is always the same' in Theodore Adorno's oft quoted summary. He also remarked 'We are forgetting how to give presents.' He argues that the calculating logic of the commodity exchange is imposed upon gift exchange. Those that do not give, or do not give properly, become dehumanised as individuals. 'In them wither the irreplaceable faculties which cannot flourish in the isolated cell of inwardness, but only in live contact with the warmth of things.' This is a kind of death. 'A chill descends on all they do' and 'recoils on those from whom it emanates.' He who does not give 'makes himself a thing and freezes'.⁴

Gift exchanges continually dissent from commodity culture; giving is an everyday practice of opposition. The exchange of gifts has a more lasting affect than the commodity exchanges that provide the dominant paradigm of contemporary culture. They are the things to which we can become attached. The everyday understanding of objects is counter to dominant ideologies of the market to continually acquire more and more new objects.

The work of gifts in societies where gift exchange is the only form of exchange and their potential in capitalist cultures is subject of Marcel Mauss' 1925 essay *The Gift*. In what is, I think, both a surrealist and structuralist manoeuvre he argues that the real meaning of the gift is its opposite: he overturns its self-evident meaning: the gift appears to be free but is actually obligatory. Mauss identified obligations to give, receive and reciprocate. A gift creates a bond that can only be broken by giving another (appropriately significant) gift in return but as the gift is relinquished the bond is rejuvenated. Gifts are pivotal in cycles of exchange, enforcing solidarities of indebtedness, sustaining friendships, families, communities, societies. Gifts are social; they are governed by the rule of reciprocity: the need to reciprocate, the imperative to give something back to the person who gave something to you. Thus the connection between the giver and gift is not over when the exchange is concluded. It is not unusual to argue that objects are humanised by handling to create an 'aura'⁵ of creativity or a patina of use but Maussian analysis goes further: part of the giver remains with the gift. I would like to suggest it is

⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*. [1951], London: Verso, 1997, pp.42-3. Reading Peter Stallybrass' essay, 'Marx's Coat', in Patricia Spyer (ed.), *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Places*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp.183-207 has encouraged me to re-read Marx for an account of the suppressed spirit of things.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in Hannah Arendt (ed), *Illuminations*, London: Fontana, 1992, pp.211-244.

possible to observe in contemporary cultures, everyday life, domestic domains that make up home or home range, that gifts constantly present their givers. They have life. Mauss summarised: 'The thing given is not inert' (Mauss, 1970:10). Such activity in objects is now usually referred to as 'agency.'⁶ There are some most wide implications of accepting the agency, affectiveness, or life of things, and in some cases their sacred status. It invites some serious thinking about the meanings of home and home range, how when homes are made, moved or unmade, we are creating, dismantling or destroying lives. It also offers a way out of consumer culture, the plundering economy of the forever new.

⁶ It is Bruno Latour's work, most notably his contribution to Actor Network Theory, rather than the Maussian analysis I offer here that has forced a debate about the agency of objects and a re-assessment of human-material relations. See <http://www.bruno-latour.fr>.