

INTRODUCTION

HOUSE/KEEPING



Sasha Newell

Le grand chef doit être comme le grand tas d'ordures.
(The big chief should be like the big rubbish heap).

—Cameroonian proverb (Guitard 2012: 155)

Across the globe in this late capitalist moment, increasing numbers of households are being overrun by the accumulation of domestic clutter. Anthropologists might be prone to belittle this as a “first world problem,” but in a world increasingly connected by circulations of wealth and waste, the Global South has already been absorbing the overflow of household excess from the First World for at least a couple of decades, and the quantity of surplus stored in private homes has dramatically increased since that time. The accumulation of material goods has reached critical levels in the last decade in the Global North, indexed by the widespread appeal of television programming and self-help books on hoarding, decluttering, and professional organizers, and the moral and ecological value of minimalism. Others (especially in the United States) have sought to control their excess stuff by cutting down on the size of the home with movements such as tiny homes (Whitford 2018) and the *#vanlife* (Monroe 2017), drawing upon the minimalist values of increased mobility and freedom by diminishing expenditure on the containment of their possessions.

Another indication of this growing social problem comes from the discipline of psychology. Since the publication in 2013 of the DSM-V (The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), the most important

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manual for psychiatric diagnosis has included Hoarding Disorder as a form of mental illness (DSM-5 Task Force 2013). According to the DSM-V, hoarding disorder is estimated to affect two and a half to five percent of the human population. As a genetic trace, neurologists suggest the disorder is probably evenly dispersed throughout the globe, and one 2018 study claims this to be true for the United Kingdom, Spain, Japan, and Brazil (Nordsletten 2018). Despite historical and anthropological indications that problematic levels of domestic accumulation are strongly correlated with capitalist economies (Hodder 2014; Smail 2014), the biomedical model continues to dominate intellectual discussion in reductionist ways (as described by Orr, Preston-Shoot, and Braye 2017). Without denying the significance of this disorder, it is important to take into account the widespread circulation and casual use of the term in popular culture and the framing of clutter and excess possessions in general around this mental disorder. As Herring argues (2014), there is a component of “moral panic” to the way in which everyday people self-diagnose or label others in relationship to this term.

Translated into English one year after the DSM-V was published, Marie Kondo’s Japanese approach to decluttering has sold eleven million books (in forty languages) and spawned television series and classes on home organization organized by self-professed “Konverts” of the Konmari method (see Blanco-Esmoris and Gould, this volume). The need to keep things in the house conflicts quite directly with the imperatives of house-keeping, even though the principal housekeeper is also responsible for the storage and organization of family belongings. The stigmatization of those with a compulsion to keep and the moral injunction to purge households of excess stuff are parallel social forces driven by the interconnected chains of causality. The widespread anxieties surrounding the imbalance between the influx and egress of domestic belongings is testament to a generalized social phenomenon with footings in middle-class sensibilities that would seem to have worldwide dissemination. While these tendencies have, thus far, primarily been approached through the genres of psychology and self-help, this collection takes a cross-cultural anthropological stance in order to highlight the socioeconomic and cultural forces shaping domestic overaccumulation, thus building a comparative spectrum of the processes surrounding the selection, retention, and expulsion of possessions.

In so doing, we make the home a focal point for thinking about the intersections of materiality and social relations (Miller 2005, 2009). In particular, these chapters open up a lens on kinship that includes not only people but things as the content of kin relationality. As Carsten writes, “The mixing of elements of old and new furnishings, heirlooms, and objects may thus express how houses capture the creative and regenerative aspects of memory work, rearranging the past, and also setting out a vista for the future” (Carsten 2007: 17). By placing housecleaning and storage as key processes of kin-making, our collection focuses on *material kinship*; that is,

we examine the materialization of kinship in homes, possessions, and waste, the practices of storage and decluttering activities as the labor of kin, as well as the way in which materials can be kin in themselves. One insightful precursor to this perspective can be found in Goldfarb and Schuster's special issue (*De)materializing Kinship*, in which they "draw attention to the ways in which material signs are a productive focus for scholars attending to relatedness in day-to-day interactions between humans, non-humans, and other material things (2016: 6). They make the important point that highlighting processes of materializing and dematerializing kinship allows a clearer view of the "non-mutuality" of kin relations, something that often emerges in the conflicts around household accumulation in this volume. Like Goldfarb and Schuster, our work builds upon the insights of what has often been called New Kinship, the wave of kinship studies that followed Schneider's (1984) symbolic turn away from mapping social relations and taxonomies towards ideologies of substance and transference (Carsten 2004), as well as the redrawn relationalities of kinship surrounding new reproductive technologies (Franklin 2001), gender (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995) and LGTBI studies (Weston 1991). One of the contributions of this movement has been a complete rethinking of kinship around questions of substance, especially in relationship to the cultural conceptualization of blood and biology (Franklin and McKinnon 2001). While anthropology has long understood the importance of material objects in the mediation of kinship relations, as Mauss' essay on the gift ([1925] 2016) or in Evans-Pritchard's famous "bovine idiom" (1940), scholars such as Strathern (1990), Carsten (1995), McKinnon (1991), Fajans (1997), and Weiner (2002) turned their attention towards how often substance was at the center of cultural conceptions of relatedness. The house emerged from this work as a key site in the making of kinship in cross-cultural perspective (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Joyce and Gillespie 2000). However, in this collection, we bring materiality to the forefront of the analysis of kinship, sewing it together with insights from a literature on materiality that has often left kinship in the background. The phrase material kinship thus signals a volition to think of these theoretical dimensions in unison, as integral parts of the same social processes. Similarly, while kinship studies have often favored more classically exotic locales and the anthropology of materiality has been especially attentive to the North Atlantic, this volume aims to bring these domains together under a symmetrical gaze that draws out the "strangeness" of North Atlantic kinship and the familiarity of material culture in the Global South.¹ Finally, the concept of material kinship conceptualizes kinship not only as relation passed *through* substance but also as a relation *with* material things, entities that not only absorb the personhood of their co-residents but also exert obligations and sentiments of their own accord.

In these stories, the household becomes a crucible of value transformation that takes place along the lines of Thompson's famous "rubbish theory" ([1979] 2017), from fortune to rot, from junk to heirloom, from

alienation to kin. Clean shiny commodities develop the patina of intimacy (Dawdy 2016) and become affectively integrated in the dwelling, but the reverse happens too, such as when emotionally searing objects associated with deceased family members, a divorce, or other family traumas are given time to “cool off” enough to allow for “dispossession” (Hirschman, Ruvio, and Belk 2012), transforming into mere clutter to be discarded or passed on at a yard sale. Our case studies—ranging from the United States, Japan, Cameroon, England, Peru, Argentina, India, and Australia—shake up conventional understandings of both sentimental and market value while demonstrating the interconnections of global accumulation that make their first appearances on the countertops and other surfaces of the home.

The twin problems of storage and clutter seem present in most societies, and yet they are rarely given a space of prominence in ethnography (Makovicky 2007), and such intermingling between relatedness, possessions, and the spatial organization of the home can serve as inspiration for new, interpretative approaches to the continued globalization of capitalist socioeconomic forces. The essays in this collection together describe the tension between keeping and housekeeping in the context of the global spread of commodities for household consumption and the accumulative consequences both within and outside the home. If the home is a container for kin relations, what happens to kinship when the house must absorb greater and greater quantities of objects? What happens to the very concept of value around which domestic consumption is oriented? What is the significance of the storage spaces of the home in which large portions of possessions are kept out of sight? What social practices and spatial processes surround waste, excess, and the riddance of objects from the home? How are these relationships being changed by the expanding availability of cheap consumer goods throughout the Global South? Presenting what may be the first book to consider domestic accumulation from a cross-cultural perspective, this collection binds together the micro-level of keeping as a form of kin intimacy with the macro-scale of global accumulation.

The arc of collection traces a spectrum from the value of accumulation to the productivity of purging. While such a small sample cannot possibly make conclusive claims about what aspects of hoarding and clutter are universal and which are culturally specific, the purpose of this collection is to ask the kinds of framing questions that can direct future research in these directions. We begin by exploring variations on keeping and the links between material accumulation and kinship-making. We not only highlight how value production forges the relations of kinship itself, but also how kin relations become materialized and how those materializations emerge in turn as members of the kin group, becoming increasingly entangled in familial interrelatedness. Such an affective intensity of relations with objects is not in itself deviant or even unusual in most parts of world (Bird-David 1999; Santos-Granero 2009), but something changes when these relationships turn from a cherished assemblage of persons and things to a

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material multitude that threatens the home and family. The ethnographic focus turns towards strategies of removal, minimalist aesthetics, and the moral injunction to declutter as an ideology with global and commodifiable clout. The processes of the negotiation of the remaining material possessions of the deceased often become key sites in which kinship relations are reconfigured. Finally, the volume turns towards the ways in which the waste matter being ejected from the home—itself a threat for global accumulation of waste—can be transfigured into resources for new forms of sociality. In the following sections, we trace out several thematic interventions that weave in and out through the volume, intersecting and overlapping in new ways across the various contexts discussed. The collection employs a variety of ethnographic contexts and thematic concerns in order to stretch North Atlantic emic concepts of hoards, heirlooms, clutter, and kinship, taking into account the differentiated geographic faces of the global commodity-scape, as well as their interconnections.

Accumulation and the Time of Capitalism

Homes tend to be depicted as sites of consumption and display, but they are also the locus of a perpetual struggle against unwanted accumulation. The imagination for growth and cumulative wealth within societies organized around capitalist economies has traditionally been boundless, and the household itself is often perceived as an expansive site for abundant accumulation, where quantity is itself an index of wealth. Indeed, by the twentieth century in Europe and the United States, this aspiration had become democratized to include nearly everyone, and was particularly crystallized in the United States in the form of the “American Dream” so often thrown back in faces of those marginalized populations who were not able to “pull themselves up by the bootstraps” (Bourgeois 2003: 326). Within the logic of neoliberal ideology, acquisition of the latest commodities was both a civic duty and a neighborly conquest. As Robert Reich wrote after George Bush exhorted the nation to “go shopping” in response to September 11, 2001, “The theory is that we demonstrate our resolve to the rest of the world by investing and consuming at least as much as we did before, preferably more . . . The terrorists tried to strike at the heart of American capitalism. We show that American capitalism is alive and well by giving it as much of our credit card as possible” (Reich 2001).

However, over the last decade, the emergence of new discourses in popular culture around hoarding disorder on the one hand and minimalist aesthetics on the other indicate a sea-change in domestic aesthetics. In prosperous regions of the world, the accumulation of clutter has become a seemingly autonomous force that threatens the very sovereignty of humans over their domestic space by literally occupying it (Bennet 2012; Newell 2014). In response, droves of organizer gurus teach residents how to control their impulse to keep, how to reorder their possessions, and above all, how

to remove things, while magazines and television documentaries proclaim the virtues of clean surfaces, bare walls, and tiny homes. The *New York Times* discussed popularity of Marie Kondo in the following terms:

By the time her book arrived, America had entered a time of peak stuff, when we had accumulated a mountain of disposable goods—from Costco toilet paper to Isaac Mizrahi swimwear by Target—but hadn’t (and still haven’t) learned how to dispose of them. We were caught between an older generation that bought a princess phone in 1970 for \$25 that was still working and a generation that bought \$600 iPhones, knowing they would have to replace them within two years. We had the princess phone and the iPhone, and we couldn’t dispose of either. We were burdened by our stuff; we were drowning in it. (Brodesser-Akner 2016)

This same generational shift is exposed in the *Washington Post*:

As baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, start cleaning out attics and basements, many are discovering that millennials, born between 1980 and 2000, are not so interested in the lifestyle trappings or nostalgic memorabilia they were so lovingly raised with. Thanks, Mom, but I really can’t use that eight-foot dining table or your king-size headboard. Whether becoming empty nesters, downsizing or just finally embracing the decluttering movement, boomers are taking a good close look at the things they have spent their life collecting. Auction houses, consignment stores and thrift shops are flooded with merchandise, much of it made of brown wood. Downsizing experts and professional organizers are comforting parents whose children appear to have lost any sentimental attachment to their adorable baby shoes and family heirloom quilts. To make matters worse, young adults don’t seem to want their own college textbooks, sports trophies or T-shirt collections, still entombed in plastic containers at their parents’ homes. (Koncius 2015)

As one of my participants in Vermont put it in 2019, “the kids won’t take the brown furniture anymore.” In a generational shift, the cultural elites of latter-day capitalist societies are thus recognizing that “less is more,” as the collection and display of valuables is being replaced by the ostentatious display a clutter-free lifestyle, and as Kilroy-Marac has argued, minimalism has become a new scale of Bourdieusian distinction (2016).²

Meanwhile, much of the Global South is still understandably clambering to achieve the basic Fifties consumer fantasy of a house, a car, and a matching set of labor-saving household appliances, and anthropologists are often skeptical that the framework around domestic accumulation developed here has any bearing on the problems experienced by households where getting food on the table is a more immediate preoccupation. But the position developed in this collection is that only through a frame that brings into focus the interconnected global economy, as well as a comparative perspective on issues of what enters, exits, and is stored within the household, can we come to terms with a future where the collective surfeit of unwanted domestic possessions will become a problem shared by all. We can see the precursors of this dilemma in the ongoing worldwide problems

with plastic refuse and recycling, epitomized by the islands of floating plastic in the ocean, the biggest of which is reported to already be twice the size of Texas (the ocean cleanup). Already twenty years ago in Côte d'Ivoire and Morocco, I was stuck by the tendency for discarded plastic bags to accumulate in public space, clogging up drainage systems and collecting on the dead stalks of past harvests, giving the appearance that farmers were cultivating plastic bags in their fields. Single-use plastic bags are no longer legal in Côte d'Ivoire, and many other nations (including the European Union) have followed suit, but in the meantime, a global capitalist economy based on plastic packaging has outrun our technological capacity to recycle it into something of value, despite decades of being told at least some of it was recyclable. Adam Minter's *Junkyard Planet* (2013) discusses the town of Shijiao, which, at the time, imported 2.2 million pounds of Christmas lights each year to melt down the plastic and harvest the copper wires, only to turn it into more plastic commodities to send back on the same shipping containers (Hodder 2016: 19). When China stopped accepting containers full of used plastic because it could no longer absorb it, Mikaela Le Meur (2019) documented the catastrophe in Vietnam, where newspapers claimed as many as 9000 containers full of waste were waiting to be emptied (many for as long as three months). Her research into Mink Khai, a Vietnamese town devoted to recycling, not only revealed mountains of plastic waste lining the roads and polluted rivers no longer suitable for fishing or bathing, but also that the recycled plastic produced there was so impure it was suitable for making little else besides the very plastic bags already being banned across the world for their negative environmental impact. According to a study published in *Nature*, "the global mass of produced plastics is greater than the overall mass of all terrestrial and marine animals combined" (Elhacham et al. 2020: 443). Indeed, anthropogenic mass (human-made mass) has now surpassed biomass on the earth as a whole, a somewhat terrifying prospect (Elhacham et al. 2020).

Of course, the accumulation of plastic waste is not the same as the accumulation of possessions in the home, but we might think of plastic as the vanguard of excess-to-come. It is the film of alienation that wraps almost every commodity to guarantee direct contact only with its future owner, and its arrival is the hallmark of disposable consumer culture. The Global North is not only exporting its waste, but also its used possessions (second-hand clothing, cars, and cellphones, for example, feature prominently in the markets of the Global South).

But just as commodities have needed to become cheaper in order for profit accumulations to continue to grow by expanding the consumer market to the working classes, the same phenomenon continues as household commodities and electronics become available in the Global South. This is especially marked by the arrival of an array of Chinese products, which Kernen and Mohammad characterize as nothing less than a revolution in their ethnography of new West African consumer practices (2014).



Figure 0.1. An elderly man's bedroom in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.
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Describing this as the emergence of a new material culture, they describe how Chinese goods should not be framed solely under the rubric of cheap and low-quality goods, but rather as prestige objects, such as motorcycles and cellphones, rendered accessible to a much wider portion of the population. Above all, the emergence of this new mass consumer society across the African continent also entails the accessibility of having *new* goods, rather

than relying on “France-au-revoir” second-hand goods to achieve signs of modernity. Presumably, these kinds of new consumer dynamics are developing in societies all over the world, allowing houses to fill with an array of new and highly replaceable products on a global scale never seen before.

From Thompson’s (this volume) expanded view, the houses of London themselves become so many heirlooms and piles of clutter, fought over collectively by those who would romantically preserve and repair the residences of the past, and those who would rebuild entire neighborhoods from a “rationalist” perspective, tearing down the old to make way for the new and producing vast quantities of rubble to be trucked out of town and out of sight. Whereas in most of our articles the house is a container for kin and kin-things, here the city is the container, and the houses and citizens are the contents. This bird’s eye view draws our attention to the ways in which the problems of clutter, waste, and storage scale up to regional and even global arenas, where political and economic decisions by those with hierarchical leverage affect the lives of all within the container in question. In most cultures, houses are modeled upon cosmological models of the body and reproduce issues of containment and divestment, and the polis is another extension of the same set of metaphors into the “body politic” (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1987). This is perhaps most concisely expressed by Warnier’s concept of *roi-pot* drawn from Cameroon, in which the king’s body, his palace, and his city are mirrored layers of the same king-as-container concept (2007). The importance of these containers within containers is that they are interconnected—thus when we expel waste from one container, it does not disappear but becomes material in the larger container that holds it. A minimalist who truly rids a house of its contents in an effort to attain an anti-consumer aesthetic only ends up adding to the waste problems of his or her community, and the planet as a whole.

Thompson here draws upon his dynamic theory of rubbish (2017), through which objects shift from the sphere of decreasing value (most commodities) to the sphere of increasing value (antiquities) by passing through a kind of liminal invisible zone of “rubbish,” during which they are removed from social space and social norms. Applied to the architecture of the home, one sees that storage is this transformative space where such “rubbish” is kept (when it is not, it is clutter). But here, Thompson extends his concepts to consider the tensions between hoarders and minimalists as part of a dynamic system in which the negotiations between these moral and aesthetic perspectives keep the overall system in order. Indeed, it is rather interesting that even as the interiors of homes are driven by a puritan aesthetic that espouses the expulsion of all extraneous matter, urban aesthetics and market value are increasingly driven by the preservation and renewal of what once was. Thompson’s argument is that these different cultural/moral/aesthetic positions are not mutually exclusive but exist within the same social system and are even interdependent on one another. This internal heterogeneity is precisely what allows one person’s waste to

be transformed into another's bounty and keep material cycling through spheres of value, instead of piling up in undead landfills (Reno 2014), where they are neither gone nor repurposed, neither vital matter nor truly dead and buried. Landfills are zombie accumulations, always threatening to rise again. In fact, Reno's point is that if humans could code discarded material as communicative signs of life (as most animals do with scat), instead of hiding it as though it did not exist, it would allow for a more posthumanly humane ecosystem in which one entity's refuse is understood to be another species "diamond" (see Guitard, this volume).

Cross-Cultural Variations in Domestic Accumulation

Despite the global dimensions of domestic accumulation, it is important to attend to the varying ways in which problems of clutter, storage, and riddance emerge in different cultural and socioeconomic contexts in order to challenge the dominant paradigms around minimalism and hoarding in the Global North. Hoarding as a mental disorder draws a line between healthy and unhealthy practices, marking not only the afflicted as unsound but also their kin, given the current scientific paradigm suggesting that there is a genetic component to hoarding. Not only are the definitions of what constitutes hoarding behavior suspiciously cultural and value-laden in the DSM-V, but there is no clear explanation in the biomedical model for why this tendency to accumulate worthless things would only emerge in the nineteenth century and not at any earlier point in human history (Smail 2014).³ To understand the presence or absence of hoarding, anthropologists must begin to think about the cultural values associated with accumulating, ridding, clutter, waste, and storage. Such data must also be put in dialogue with the differential access to the proliferation of material possessions both within and between societies. This volume does not pretend to be able to produce answers to this dilemma; rather, we seek to open up the questions, pushing at the assumed meanings of these terms and examining their appearance or non-appearance in a variety of sociocultural settings.

Differential levels of wealth cannot be clearly correlated to the amount of objects found in a home, especially if we open up the categories of things accumulated beyond the standard commodities considered as "consumption," a step that is necessary given that hoarders of old cell-phones, magazines, or their grandmother's tax receipts are often lumped together with those who rescue objects from other people's garbage, collect cats, or even their own hair and fingernails. Thus, we begin this volume by stretching our understanding of the objects stored in homes and how these relate to our other analytic categories of kinship, social space, and capitalism.

The stockpiled potatoes in Andean homes are read as a form of kin, whose collaboration is necessary for the well-being of the household and

who must be “kept happy” and treated with respect. The potatoes emerge within Angé’s ethnography as rather fragile beings with tender emotions, sensitive to both physical and symbolic shock. A dark, enclosed room of the house is devoted mostly to potatoes, and it is a space only women can enter, barefoot and hat in hand. Potatoes must not be touched unless they are to be consumed, for their very nature can transform under such duress and their edibility can be compromised. Potatoes (whose genealogies are also traced) are understood to be part of the family and community in a dialectically constructed kin group, where potatoes are mothers to humans, who in turn nurture future potatoes.

In contrast, the house can also be a site that brings together the abstraction of speculative global markets with the material qualities of accumulating and caring for the bounty of agricultural storage. Matthan (this volume) describes how onion farmers in India store thousands of onions within their home in hopes of hitting the highs of the wildly fluctuating onion trade. The act of onion storage is risky, of questionable morality, and successfully hitting the peak of an onion market bubble accrues the farmer a reputation for courage and acumen. Even while women do the primary labor of sorting and caring for the onions, removing any that might encourage the rot of the assemblage, men garner reputation for the speculative prowess. Of course, only those with the means to build extra space for storing their onions can profit from these market fluctuations, since there is no public warehousing of the onion harvest.

These two articles make for fascinating comparisons around themes of domestic space, kinship, and capitalism. In the Andes, the potatoes that are closest to kin are never even brought to the market, for insensitive urban consumers might disrespect them or handle them improperly, risking the vitality of the entire potato lineage. Indian onion farmers, by contrast, sacrifice their own domestic space to the temptations of onion futures, filling up their living space with onions that must be cared for and watched just as much as the potatoes, lest rot infect the hoard before the market reaches its potential and the entire crop is lost. Here kin is mediated by the capricious gestures of the market’s invisible hand, the social space of family swallowed by a crowd of onions, but also produced by their return as greater wealth and prestige in years to come, to be converted into more domestic space. Although the onion hoarder’s consumption habits remain opaque, presumably some of their wealth will be converted into domestic commodities that signal their increased income, thereby filling up the limited space of sociality still further.

I would like to contextualize this comparison further with consideration of Mosko’s “Fractal Yam,” where he describes the ways in which tubers form a cultural model in Melanesia based on the biological structure of yam plant itself, consisting of base, body, tip, and the resulting fruit. This biological metaphor structures how Melanesians across the Massim region understand kinship, exchange, cooking, storage and display.

As Malinowski (1935: 171–74) noted, a gardener initially displays his harvested yams in temporary shelters (*kalimomia*) for passersby to admire, with the exchange yams gathered into a conical heap (*gugula*) at the shelter's center and the seeds sorted into smaller piles at the base of the shelter's peripheral walls. Like newborn human children, harvested yams are white and weak, vulnerable to the darkening and ageing light of the sun. Shelters thus protect young yams similarly to human mothers' birth cloaks (*saikeula*). A heap of exchange yams consists of an *u'ula*, base, typically circumscribed by a short ring fence (*lolewa*) containing the largest, oftentimes non-symmetrical tubers, a *tapwala* (body), composed of consistently proportioned tubers which culminate in the pile's *doginala* (peak). Villagers regard the outermost layer of perfectly shaped tubers, however, as also a part of the heap's tip, especially when, as in the case of chiefs, exposed yams are decorated with paint and pandanus streamers, similar to the adornment of the skins of human children, adolescents, kula traders, and the recently deceased (e.g., Weiner 1976: 36, 69, 127, 237–38). The heaping and garden display of exchange yams thus recapitulates the spatial and temporal coordinates of the now-dead plants and gardens that grew them and the clusters in which they were formed. (Mosko 2009: 686–87)

One of the fascinating aspects of Melanesian storage is that it tends to collapse the visible/invisible distinction around which much of the analysis in this book is built—yams are stored as public display, at once the fruit of their gardening effort and the base of kin and exchange relationships that will be built and maintained upon these accumulations. Here, the storage container is wide open to public viewing, the best yams selected and adorned like children or kula exchange partners as the outside tip or skin of the yam assemblage. Indeed, the exchange yam houses built to receive these garden displays are highly decorated, with thatched rooves and painted patterns, even resembling a human house but stretched vertically to form a small tower. In all three of these comestible storage examples, storage is an act that is highly valued, even if precarious and open to moral judgement. They bear consideration because storage technology was probably first developed for the purposes of preserving food, and traces of this may carry into contemporary issues with storing inanimate and unvalued things.

Hoarders are often described as ceding the space of the home to their irrational attachments to objects of little value, but once we apply a cross-cultural lens to the situation, the fact that outside the Global North most people have fewer “possessions”⁴ to their name does not mean they are free of the same “sentimental” attachments to objects, or to the seemingly irrational desire to keep broken electronic appliances that I have found to be so common in the United States. Indeed, Katrien Pype has discovered that in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, electronic appliances remain in homes long after their functioning ceases, both as a memory of its social role in the home and its previous symbolic claims of access to modernity, *as well as* a reservoir of spare parts for future reparations (2016). She begins with an intriguing question: “. . . in many living rooms of elderly Kinois (inhabitants of Kinshasa), old and defunctive radio and television sets are put on display. When their primary function, to inform, has been rendered

obsolete, we are faced with the question why people continue to display these objects, often next to newer models, in their living rooms” (1). Pype argues that the role such media objects play in enhancing social communication and the temporality of futurity they embody (even if a past rendition of such futurity) makes them very hard to let go of. Many elderly people held on to old radios from their youth long after they stopped working, often referencing the now dead member of a former generation who had given it to them, even carrying the defunct device from house to house in their moves. Indeed, I witnessed the same phenomenon in Abidjan; my landlord had a beautiful old wooden Grundig shortwave, much like the one Pype describes. She writes: “In local parlance, Kinois talk about *les paves* as bodies of ‘dead radios’ or ‘dead television sets.’ *Radio ekufi*, the radio has died, it is said. My research will show that ‘dead material’ continues to retain social value, even when stored in a closet or partly dismantled” (2016: 5). The last sentence resonates in my head, because of how commonly I have encountered broken electronic media in US homes whose owners felt some kind of value even when its function ceased. In Kinshasa, such undead media are the sites of generational struggle over different forms of material value, as children and grandchildren harvest spare parts and materials from the defunct machines for resale, often against the will of their elders. Pype writes: “For these children, it is clear that the pasts that outdated objects inhabit, and in particular the social relationships that they represent, have no value to the present anymore . . . When elders do protest against the destruction of a radio or a television set, they are met with the phrase: ‘you are being nostalgic’” (2016: 14).

These are the stories of particular devices that match the kinds of attachment to used things I have seen in the United States, but Pype’s work speaks less to the question of clutter or accumulation in regions of the Global South. Preliminary research in Abidjan indicates that similar dynamics of involuntary accumulation that I documented in earlier work in the US (2014, 2018) can be found in Côte d’Ivoire. I first saw this during a visit to Abidjan in 2015, I stayed with my old friend Raoul from my research in 2001. He had moved into his parents’ middle-class home, within which his old boyhood room remained intact, though it had gradually been transformed into a storage space. One day, his wife ordered the maids to empty this wasted room into the courtyard so that he could sort through it. We spent an hour sifting through the stored possessions, which included a broken fan, his high school notebooks, pictures from his first trip to study abroad in Tunisia in the 1970s, old clothing that would no longer fit him, plastic bins full of assorted objects, and other assorted junk. In short, in terms of general categories present, Raoul’s old bedroom contained much the same kinds of things that my research participants in the United States have in their storage spaces. Finally, he put the photos we had been nostalgically reminiscing over back into the pile, and ordered the maids to put it all back in his old bedroom. “I don’t have time for this,” he said, “I need

to work.” This is precisely the kind of feeling many people expressed in my research in the United States, when, after gearing themselves up for a good purge, they faced the reality of what their boxes of stored things contained. While some persevered and separated out a pile of things to take away, others sent me away in exhaustion before we had really gotten started.

Inspired by this experience, I returned in November 2022 to investigate how common this kind of similarity might be and whether it had any relationship to class status. I conducted a series of interviews using essentially the same methodology as those in my US interviews. While I have not yet had a chance to analyze this new ethnographic material in detail, it was immediately very clear that many of the same relationships of attachment to household objects and accumulations of clutter also exist in Côte d’Ivoire, despite a comparative poverty and the recycling practices described by Emilie Guitard (this volume). Even though there might be far fewer possessions in absolute quantitative terms, the size of personal space and lack of storage meant that clutter emerged in quite similar ways. At the same time, many of those interviewed held onto objects for purely sentimental reasons. As one middle-aged woman put it, she felt “pity” for these objects that had served her so well and shared her life, and she kept an entire cupboard of objects that she no longer used but would never part with unless someone else planned to use them. At the same time, important differences emerged. “The village” proved a crucial resource for many urban dwellers to clear their cramped space of no longer used objects (especially clothing), as well as to store their memorabilia, though fears of witchcraft also prevented many from trusting their things with others. This volume attempts to inspire future research into the effects of capitalist possession upon domestic space in global and cross-cultural terms.

Houses as Containers for Kinship

We have to ask what kind of “bag” a house is, or what kind of “house” a bag is. (Strathern 2013: 110)

For the purposes of this volume, we define houses heuristically as containers for kin (Shryock and Smail 2018), noting that this leaves room for extensive variation in the meaning of each of these terms (see Gygi, this volume), but insisting that “the process of kinship and the process of the house are so thoroughly intertwined as to be one process” (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995: 40).⁵ Drawing upon such works as *About the House* (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995) and *Home Possessions* (Miller 2001), this collection focuses on the ways in the material contents of the home and its internal organization delineate kin relations. If the house is a container for social bodies who are imagined in a mutuality of being (Sahlins 2013), then all the contents of the home have the potential to belong as kin (Gamble 2007). Not only do the humans and assorted animals and plants that



Figure 0.2. A wall of one woman's apartment in Abidjan was comprised of things she no longer used, but would not part with unless someone else promised to use them. She felt "pity" for these things with which she had shared her life. © Sasha Newell, 2022

make up the multispecies unity of the home often count as kin, but also their things, at least those which absorb the partible personhood of their human co-dwellers. Kinship relations are materialized in the structure of the home itself but also in the flow of things from one internal space to

another (Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003), the storage of inalienable objects (Weiner 1992; Godelier 1999), and the entrances and exits at the threshold of the home, as “the continuous movement of goods and people between the inside and the outside, a movement sometimes represented as one through the orifices of the body, again attest to the processual and animate qualities of the house” (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995: 40). It is not enough to say that material possessions mediate relations; they also take on the aspect of social beings, as with Kwakiutl coppers, kula valuables, heirlooms passed through generations, or cars who are named and spoken to. We contribute to the emergence of an anthropology of materiality and kinship together (Makovicky 2007; Holmes 2019) by examining the ways in which the management of material belongings produces the belonging of kinship, even as such possessions also accrue animacy and take on the role of members of the kin group in their own right. While anthropologists have often described objects such as gifts and heirlooms as part of the fabric of kinship, here we incorporate storage and clutter as key aspects of kin relationality, where objects project their own sets of social obligations (Empson 2012).

As Miller pointed out in his pioneering work on homes, the materiality of the home is crucial to the social work that it does:

Once one acknowledges the degree to which the home itself is both a site of agency and a site of mobility, rather than simply a kind of symbolic system that acts as the backdrop or blueprint for practice and agency, then the rewards of this focus upon material culture in trying to understand the social relations that pertain to the home become apparent. (Miller 2001: 12)

Without neglecting the house’s objectivizing capacity to both act as a “model of and model for,” Miller encourages us to examine how the house and its contents not only inform human social relationships but also constrain and activate them. As he suggests in his essay, “Possessions,” in the same volume (2001: 107–22), houses even participate in them as social entities in the form of ghosts. It is this concept of material things as possessed not only as belongings but also by spirits that informs our relationship to homes and their contents.

Gygi (this volume) demonstrates how the very concept of home in Japan works quite differently (and less materially), built upon cultural distinct concepts of privacy and interiority, such that the idea of a hoarder in the sense delineated in Anglophone media cannot exist. Gygi uses this challenge to the universal qualities of the home container to interrogate a key principle of the contemporary psychological hoarding model—the idea that mind and house mirror one another such that the disorder of the home is a symptom of a mental disorder—as a misapplication of cartesian categories beyond their cultural distribution. Since privacy is not produced by built material spatial boundaries so much as internally focused attention, the internal and external boundaries of the home are fluid and malleable—sometimes the

convenience store or the public bathhouse count as homes, and everyone will politely ignore someone in their pajamas in the street under the assumption that they are not actually in public. Perhaps more fundamentally, there is no “public space” of the home itself, as one does not typically invite people from the outside in to visit. Japan’s “women who cannot tidy up” only recognize themselves this way on the rare occasion that someone else sees their domestic space. They were unable to see their mess on their own and their “disorder” could only be determined through social interaction.

However, a subtext runs through Gygi’s argument that bears consideration—that the meaning of home and family in Japan has undergone considerable transformation over the last century, and not only are nuclear families more prevalent, but fixed material walls are more common both outside and inside the home, producing more sequestered spaces of privacy with unintentional affordances, an argument that resonates with Blanco-Esmoris’ portrait of aspirational middle-class home-ownership in Argentina (this volume).

In my chapter, I focus on the relationship between clutter and kinship, arguing that clutter is typically held onto for its expansive relationality, often at the behest of other absent or dead family members, gradually filling up social spaces and being progressively stuffed into hidden storage spaces of the home, typically in a disorganized fashion that reproduces the disorder of clutter but masks it from public view. I argue that storing things for people is a “labor of love” that in fact makes kinship, especially in a world where neoliberal capitalist pressures tend to pull families apart spatially. But more than this, while the stuff stored not only represents kin relationships, I argue that it is itself also a form of kin. Like the woman in Abidjan who pities her former possessions, many people I interviewed in the US felt bonded and even obligated to the things that they preserve and protect. In this sense, the contents of the home become defined as kin-things that belong, and to discard them feels more and more as though their social history together is being denied.

While my chapter focuses on non-hoarders with tendencies to accumulate, Kilroy-Marac’s (this volume) research examines the role of hoards within families from the perspective of the adult children of hoarders (ACoH). In hoarding houses, family members often feel they must compete for attention and space with the hoard itself. Kilroy-Marac highlights the often overlooked “dark side of kinship” in which the competition for space and affection are as much a part of the relational nexus as love and belonging, epitomized by the way in which family members are “subjected” to the hoard, whose sensual presence is undeniably obtrusive. Kilroy-Marac discusses how the hoard and house merge into a single entity, an entity that inscribes itself upon the memories and imaginaries of the entire family in ways that affect their understanding of relationality going forward. Drawing upon her own personal experience, she also confronts the problematic inheritance of the hoard, when the adult must face their



Figure 0.3. A former bedroom converted to storage, Vermont. © Sasha Newell, 2019

childhood memories in their current state of decay. In the end, the desire to preserve these things and the relationships they embody is overcome by the agency of the hoard itself. It is the hoard that consumes, in the end, and not just the materials that dissolve in its midst, but also memories and even relationships.

As such, the presence of kin-things and kin-assemblages are not only composed of the cozy sentimental value of cherished and inalienable heirlooms, but they also take on parasitic qualities, attaching to their human family members with affective hooks that bind and blind their prey as they drain vitality and sociality from their co-dwellers.

Hoarding, Minimalism, and the Magic of Decluttering

Like all social products, kinship is made through human labor, and the labor of storage and decluttering is rife with tensions over whose rights in particular that objects and spaces prevail. De Beauvoir captures this dynamic, and especially its gendering role, in her description of housework, where tidying is a war against life itself:

Washing, ironing, sweeping, ferreting out fluff from under wardrobes—all this halting of decay is also the denial of life; for time simultaneously creates and destroys, and only its negative aspect concerns the housekeeper . . . The maniac housekeeper wages her furious war against dirt, blaming life itself for the rubbish all living growth entails. When any living being enters her house, her eye gleams with a wicked light: “Wipe your feet, don’t tear the place apart,

leave that alone!” She wishes those of her household would hardly breathe; everything means more thankless work for her. (1953 [2011]: 438)

The tragic irony is that the more that the housekeeper seeks to preserve the purity of this perfect domestic order, the more her husband and children will seek to transcend it. Of course, not all housekeepers are women, and De Beauvoir’s mid-century depictions of housewives sometimes read as outdated reifications of women’s relationship to domestic labor. Even if men are often expected to take on more responsibility for the household and most women work outside the home at least some of the time, the current vogue for spotless minimalist interiors nevertheless raises the stakes for this battle against the movement of life and its material traces in the home, and I think it goes without saying that in many homes, especially those with children, women continue to bear the brunt of this labor, no matter how much men congratulate themselves for their participation. Indeed, while men in the United States do twice as much housework in 2005 than in 1976, married women in 2005 did seven hours more housework a week than single women, whereas married men did one hour less. In households with three children, women did an average of twenty-eight hours of housework a week while men only did ten, three hours more than married men with no children (Stafford 2008).

The primary act of decluttering is “to put things away.” But the presence of clutter contradicts this thesis because it is made up primarily of things that “have no elsewhere,” as design theorist Baker put it in his fantastic essay about clutter (1995). That is, if some clutter accumulates through inertia and procrastination, the clutter that really sticks is that which does not belong anywhere. It is not decorative enough to hang on the wall, not useful enough to make up part of the array of tools ready-at-hand, and yet too important, for one reason or another, to be discarded. Most people deal with this category by putting it in storage, and it is for this reason, as an unmarried Spanish woman with four brothers pointed out to me, that women tend to have a more intimate relationship with storage. When her mother died, it was she who did the primary work of sorting through the kin-things that remained and deciding what should be discarded and what should be distributed amongst the siblings. The relationship of the feminine role to managing material excess is echoed in both Blanco-Esmoris’ and Gould’s analyses (this volume) of women’s central role in care and ridding practices surrounding material possessions. In much of the world, the care-work of kinship around the maintenance of domestic space and the preservation of material kinship in non-social space tends to fall on women’s shoulders, as also demonstrated by the fact that significantly more women than men were willing to talk to me about this subject.

Undoubtedly, there is as much cultural variation around the ideals of housekeeping as in practices of keeping things in the house, but it does also

seem likely that a specific idealized aesthetics of housekeeping is spreading through an increasingly globalized middle class, given the international success of minimalist self-help literature and Marie Kondo's appearance in several of the chapters in this volume. That is to say, the pressure to declutter has taken on the veneer of fashion. As Kilroy-Marac has written:

It's not just the meticulous arrangement of these interiors, then, but the obvious absence of clutter that signals a new form of affluence . . . [A] close look at the not-there renders visible the practices of organizing and divestment that often contain within themselves their own practices of consumption. (2016: 446)

This is clearest in the case of Blanco-Esmoris' chapter, where she reveals how deeply decluttering enters into an aspirational aesthetic of middle-class achievement. The women in her stories are motivated to improve their lives (and their souls) by acting upon the material contents and structure of their homes. Already to own a home in Argentina is the attainment of a specific class mobility in which the attainment of a nuclear family, car, and independent property were indicators of joining a modern and partially globalized identity. What is fascinating, therefore, is that it would seem that a social identity based on consumer acquisition, even newly attained, comes with the corresponding pressure to declutter. Blanco-Esmoris also articulates how acts of decluttering and renovation engage the family in rethinking the home and revitalizing kin relations in the process, revealing the interlacing of practices of discarding with the tissue of kinship. When Louisa's children come over to help declutter, they reminisce about their past together while reimagining the future of their family home as they free up space for the new by removing their own material past.

Likewise, Herrmann's garage sale ethnography (this volume) serves to highlight how kinship is produced both by ridding and "liberating space" for family, while at the same time virtually expanding the kin network through the material transfers of sentimental objects to those outside the home. In fact, Herrmann finds that garage sale transfers do not necessarily produce full alienation as with typical commodities. Sometimes the new owners think of the house and the previous owner of the object they purchased, in one case even treating it as a "memorial to motherly love," while sellers carefully choose "a good home" for objects they continue to care about, even going so far as to request a buyer wear a necklace she purchased to a music event they were both attending. The yard sale itself is a curious moment of eversion of inside of the house (often dominated by things long relegated to innermost storage space) into the public space surrounding the home—a topsy-turvy moment of category-blurring that encourages the hybrid gift-commodity transfers that Herrmann has taught us to appreciate throughout her research.

And Gould extends these insights about minimalist consumption and ridding to death itself. Here again we see the strong impact of the consumption of literature and other media surrounding minimalism and

“death-cleaning,” and Gould emphasizes the growing consciousness in Australia of the burden of one’s possessions after death. A major strain of this movement is the idea that “acquisition = death denial,” a critique of the idea that the person can live on through their material remains. Indeed, to bequeath one’s abundant collection upon one’s kin is increasingly considered to be a kind of cursed inheritance, requiring not only great efforts and resources but representing a complicated emotional labor of sorting and choosing which objects are valuable enough to be kept and by whom. The literature often directly implicates the reader in the guilt of leaving such work to their kin rather than taking it on themselves, focusing material care practices on what happens after death and the negative legacies that material inheritance can produce.

Throughout the book, we find such moments of cleaning as a kind of magic in which the renewal of the home through decluttering is believed to be a cleansing process that is morally good, purifying the mind and social relationships that tend to become muddled in the midst of the material clutter. Etymologically, clutter is related to “clotting” (Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003: 232) and as excess things fill the home the entirety of the domestic social body can be thought of as “clotting,” losing its vitality as its internal flow becomes caught in the obstacles filling its channels of movement. This is the parasitic, clingy, life-sucking aspect of material vitality, which shows up in many of our chapters. Even when it comes to edibles like potatoes and onions, the care, time, and space sacrificed to these life-nourishing crops recalls the maxim of Ian Hodder (2014) on material entanglement: the more things one has, the more things and care they will require to maintain them. Onions and potatoes are good things to have on hand, but they produce chains of entanglement, for the solutions we produce for our material needs inevitably involve more things which will require their own maintenance and material/human dependence.

One form of decluttering magic many people rely on is the transformation of the material into the digital, with the illusion that as such it continues to exist in immaterial form (though in fact the material and energetic cost of digital storage makes up a bigger and bigger environmental and human impact, both in the mining regions where minerals essential to digital lives are procured, and in the air-cooled buildings devoted to servers scattered around the globe. But perhaps more importantly, as Miller reminds us in his afterword, many of the same themes of hoarding and purging reappear in the realm of the digital. The smartphone is yet another container, like the house, in which aspects of our selves and all of our relations are stored. It is a dividual object par excellence, at one containing representations and links to everyone we care about, severable from our bodies but rarely in fact outside of the room we are in. But as cloud storage platforms never tire of reminding their clients, smartphones and even clouds fill up with data. Digital hoarding is now a popular hashtag and a search on Google will bring you dozens, even hundreds of sites. As Miller mentions, increasing

efforts are given to software that helps us to make the triage, to automatically suggest what can be deleted, but even so few are able to keep up with our email, let alone the archive of messages already read. Digital platforms are thus yet another space in which to store things, only deferring the inevitable arrival of digital clutter to compound the material clutter already surrounding most readers.

Some of us in this volume are also critical of this tendency to equate materiality with its negative implications. Hoarders, as Bennet so insightfully argues (2012), often keep things out of a keener sensibility for the vitality of things. Often storage is filled with things in order to avoid further engagement with consumerism, respecting the potential of each thing for future reuse or repurposing. While there can be no doubt that the consumer culture fostered by capitalist economies has had disastrous environmental and social consequences over the last two and half centuries, this is not the same as to diagnose the accumulation of material goods in a household as a sign of moral and/or moral disorder. There is good anthropological reason to believe that social relations take place largely through things, and even with things (Goldfarb and Schuster 2016), and that these dividual relationships deserve some respect, even when they go against local cultural aesthetic or environmental norms. Clearly, as things pile up and take over social space, domestic accumulation risks interfering with sociality and even the things themselves suffer neglect and damage as they disappear under the weight of the assemblage.

Conclusion: Increase, Rot, and Renewal

Whether the potential usefulness of kept things that most people throw away, stored for a thousand forking paths of futurity in Newell's work, the urban renewal and recycling of urban waste in Thompson's essay, or the "pathways to reuse" produced by Herrmann's yard sales, the composite being of the pile of clutter also breeds new vitalisms and even potential future connectivities. Haraway (2016) has asked us to think of kin-making through the agricultural logic of compost, in which the jumbled pile of organic detritus allows for so many new forms of relatedness and these biological connections become the source of new life. Such a metaphor serves surprisingly well for understanding the power of clutter to cling, as well as the posthuman economies influencing housekeeping, storage, and collective waste management. Here, we also consider more semiotic forms of rebirth through which "dead media" (Pype, 2016) and other objects become undead, serving to unlock the affective doors to the past while providing the material resources through which to refashion relationality itself. Thompson's essay makes for an excellent finale, taking our focus beyond the intimate walls of the domestic and reminding us of the ways in which the wasted remains of the past (in wastewater and construction rubble alike) can be used to rekindle the return to the next cycle of value

production. Ingold's (2013) long *durée* perspective that calls for us to think more about materials and less within the strictures of things is useful here as well, allowing for a recognition of seemingly permanent objects to transform fluidly from rock to sand, from mud to brick, from scrap to art.

There is a temporal tension within the dynamics of keeping: will things increase in value, become once again useful or desired, and finally fulfill their functional destiny? Or will they only increase in number, seemingly reproducing like fruit flies over gradually blackening bananas? Many things are held onto with the idea that they will one day be properly appreciated either by future family members, unspecified strangers, or even by oneself, in an imagined moment of where there will be more time. Of course, kept things can also lose value, often becoming damaged over time, losing color, developing mildew, or even literally rotting away. All kinds of life can take hold in these situations, hosting insects, mice, squirrels, mold, and so on. The case of food is particularly poignant, for when consumed, it is transformed into the literal flesh of kinship, into the burned energy of family production, or into the economic success of the household at the market, but when unconsumed, it slips quickly into noxious putrefaction, a stinking index of moral decay. To leave something as socially valuable as food to rot is not only a sign of excess and a lack of socially responsible distribution, but the waste of life itself, as demonstrated vividly in both Angé and Matthan's texts. And yet those who keep food to the point of rotting do so precisely because they see it as too valuable to throw away.

The connection between hoarding and rot even shows up in the dry texts of economic policy in the nineteenth century, where hoarders are criticized as "barbarians" who allow their money to "molder" away in their mattresses, "stagnating" rather than circulating and benefiting the national economy (Peebles 2008: 235, 238). A civilizing discourse par excellence, banks and economists worked to educate the public that value only attained its proper form outside the home, in constant and vital motion. In a later text, Peebles explores the opposition between hoarding and saving in terms of centripetal and centrifugal forces (2020). Hoarders pull the outside inwards, while the act of saving (in banking terms) projects the self outwards into social circulation. Strangely, at this moment, bank capitalism starts to sound like Melanesian gift exchange, and despite Peebles intentions to rescue hoarding from its negative representations, his categorization of hoards as dead and savings as living does not appear to help his cause—at least at first glance.

For running through these essays, we also find glimpses of the circular value hidden within waste—the fertile rebirth of life lurking inside the dead remains of past things. This theme is most explicitly crystalized in the work of Guitard, whose investigations of the everchanging economic and cultural relationships with domestic refuse offer an important contrast to the emphasis on possessions in the volume. She demonstrates that in Garoua and Maroua, very little of value actually leaves the household,

and when it does, it tends to go directly to private waste collectors who go door to door seeking profit.⁶ Everything that can find a future use, even as raw materials, has recognized value. That which does not is mostly organic (though the plastic content is rapidly growing) and is also collected as compost. Formerly, the quantities of compost deposited in front of the house indicated the wealth and power of the owner (their potency), but over time it became more and more stigmatized, such that refuse had to be snuck out of the house by children or others of low prestige. Perhaps most interesting of all are the dangerous spirits that lurk in the garbage that does leave the house. Those who spend too much time searching for value in the refuse of others are likely to become possessed by these spirits and lose their minds, becoming overpowered by the agency of these things whose value and sociality has been denied. Perhaps such spirits can be understood as the collective recognition of the social force and power of entanglement that discarded items have over those who come in contact with them. Finally, despite the negative associations and low prestige of discarded things, throughout Guitard's chapter, we sense continuously the potential future value of that which is no longer useful to the household.

Indeed, Peebles suggests that hoarding resembles the cadaver in just this sense, the fertile value of rot appearing here again in the opposition between life and death carried by saving and hoarding, respectively:

Many people acknowledge that death can be terrifying and horrible, but that the dead body nevertheless will continue to support life, both via the "sticky" kinship relations that it will forever haunt and via simply "pushing up the daisies" as part of nature's inevitable flow. The oscillation between life and death captured in the representation of a cadaver mirrors the oscillation between hoarding and saving. Sustaining social worlds can sometimes be achieved by the hauntings of the hoard, while sometimes it is done via the seeding performed by saving. (2020: 3)

By emphasizing the fertility of rot, or more prosaically, the future potentiality of discarded heaps of rubbish, we may be able to generate a consumer aesthetic more attuned to the future lives of those things we bring into our lives, claiming them less as possessions which we reject when they no longer please than as fellow travelers whose trajectories only temporarily coincide with our own.

Lepselter's analysis of the first episode of *Hoarders* is relevant here (2011). She discussed Jill, whose home, crowded with objects that brimmed with potential in her eyes, also contained a rotting pumpkin. The psychologist who was there to help steer her back into social normatively argued that the pumpkin was a health hazard.⁷ Jill agreed after negotiation to part with the pumpkin:

She reluctantly agrees to part with it—doing her part in the negotiation—and then, at the last moment, plunges her hand into the orange mess, grabbing around inside it. "Wait. Let me get the seeds." Even rot is to be seen for its

“seeds”—its endless potential. She says she may plant some of these seeds, and then she can, in effect, still be able to have *this very pumpkin*, or have it magically back again the way it was before. For it was a wonderful pumpkin. There was never a pumpkin like that one. It is singular, unexchangeable, and sacred. For her, it is intolerable to let go of this singularity in the world of things, to let *its specificity* go to waste. At this moment, she believes she will redeem it. (2011: 941)

This “singularity” is precisely what makes these things feel just as undiscardable as people. Herring also comments on this story, asking us to consider whether or not we should consider respecting Jill’s pumpkin as an intimate whose company she enjoyed, for “what if she liked hanging out with pumpkins more than with her sister?” (Herring 2014: 12). This is just the problem that Kilroy-Marac’s ethnography highlights so poignantly. Children of hoarders sometimes feel that their parents choose the hoard over their human family, and the rot takes down the relationships with it.

However, while this should not be ignored nor downplayed (I also believe accumulations have dangerous capacities to swallow all that surrounds them), I want to think here in the conclusion towards the relationship between rot and potentiality. For in many societies, rot is associated with fertility—thus, for example, the Trobriand islanders take pride in storehouses so full that the yams begin to rot, an index of the fertility of the gardens a brother plants for his sister and her husband, as well as the strength of their relationship. In the words of Malinowski:

They will boast that . . . half the yams will rot away in the storehouses, and be thrown on the *wawa*, the rubbish heap at the back of the houses, to make room for the new harvest. Here again we meet the typical idea that the main aim of accumulating food is to keep it exhibited in the yam houses till it rots, and then can be replaced by a new *étalage*. (1922: 169)

Malinowski, like the Trobrianders themselves, it would seem, place the emphasis on the display, but what happens afterwards behind the houses is just as relevant. After all, it is the moldering layers of compost turning into dark soil that brings the most vibrant growth, something all gardeners know well. Indeed, the Hua associate rotting leaves and darkness with the womb and see these as potent sources of life and growth that men try to capture in their most secret initiations in which they try to become more like women (Meigs 1995). In this book, we consider how on an increasingly global scale, commodities circulating on the market are transformed into the inalienable and enchanted, personally infused “stuff of kinship” that fills up the household containers throughout late capitalist societies. Perhaps those of us living in such societies should take a cue from Weiner’s reanalysis of Trobriand society in terms of the differences between women’s wealth (ephemeral and labor-intensive banana leaf bundles) and the circulation of men’s durable and alienable wealth. Indeed, Trobriand women’s wealth is distinct from the men’s in its capacity to rot, and their banana leaf

bundle currency must continuously be renewed through productive human labor or disappear—but Weiner demonstrates that the durable wealth of men’s valuables ultimately depends upon exchanges built on women’s banana-leaf labor, made visible in the mortuary ceremonies where women compensate each other for the work of care that went into the personhood of the deceased. In this moment of late capitalist crisis, I suggest that we must recalibrate our sensibilities to the vital potentiality of stored clutter, the matter of kinship, making room for it within the visible center of our value scheme. Not that homes should be cluttered nor be organized around enormous storage spaces, but that instead of denying the compelling qualities of clutter and seeking to project a minimalist exterior to the world, societies should work towards collective solutions to socioeconomic structures that produce “surplus value” at toxic levels of intensity. As the currency of exchange becomes ever more alienated from material relations, we must communicate where and how we are keeping, indeed hoarding our sense of relatedness, to one another as well as to the built material things (anthropogenic mass) that make up who we are.

Perhaps the ultimate figure for the fertility of rot is the Cameroonian proverb with which I began the volume, “*le grand chef doit être comme le grand tas d’ordures*” (the great chief must be like the big rubbish heap) (Guitard 2012: 155). Guitard’s fascinating research (2017) indicates that under the previous royal regime, not only were large rubbish heaps indexical of the spiritual and political power a sacred king wielded, but that the collection and centralization of rubbish in the Garoua and Maroua regions of Cameroon was a kind of Foucauldian *dispositif* (mechanism) for the subjectivation of citizens into the body politic. On a daily basis, the household waste was collected from pile to pile until it reached the village chiefs door, from which every year a portion was ritually removed and added to the king’s mound, placed just in front of his palace.

The waste is collected every morning by the women when they sweep the house and courtyard floors. In a series of routine bodily techniques, the refuse is collected at the levels of the rooms, buildings, households, residential quarters and villages. Then, once a year, a fair quantity of it is dug out, loaded into baskets and carried all the way to the king’s waste heap . . . Waste is identified with the bodies of the subjects who have expelled it. Collecting the waste amounts to collecting something of the subjects’ bodies—a kind of left over, a part, a substance imbued with their subjectivity. Piling together the waste achieves a totalizing of the subjects of the kingdom and fuses them with the refuse of the king himself and of his household within the royal heap.

In this way, the very bodily detritus of each citizen was amalgamated with that of the rest in order to produce a powerful composite being, a spiritual entity (*setene*) with its own agency, and the source of the king’s own political and spiritual potency. I believe this perfectly encapsulates what I mean by the phrase “the fertility of rot.” Here, the chemical decomposition of the contents expelled from the bodies, houses, and villages of the kingdom

become a metaphor for the unity, productivity, and wealth of the society as a whole, containing the power for both positive rule and dangerous sorcery. At another level, I suggest that the king's rubbish heap might serve our increasingly global society as a symbolic inspiration for the need to consider the material endurance of our productions as at once an entity beyond our control and a resource for the future. As Haraway frames her call to multispecies kin: "We are humus, not Homo, not anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman" (2016: 55). If our multispecies community must also include the dividual meshwork of possessions, perhaps we had best begin making compostable currencies for our kin relations as well.

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Notes

1. However, the human kinship that emerges in these chapters is quite heteronormative in structure, and in this sense, the kin relationships described may fall too easily into North Atlantic projections of an idealized nuclear family. We hope that our attention to objects as important members of kin groups nonetheless serves to challenge normative boundaries of kinship from another angle, one that could also work towards the "queering" of what constitutes family.

2. Minimalism and its anti-materialist predecessors have waxed and waned over decades, even centuries (not incidentally encouraged by the Protestant aesthetics but pre-existing that) in Euro-American cultures, and there is no doubt that the social dynamics of fashion are at play here. However, the correlation with the emergence of hoarding disorder is unprecedented, since the contemporary pandemic of hoarding disorder has no historical antecedents (Smail 2014).
3. Smail suggests that it may be an epigenetic phenomenon triggered by the late-capitalist condition.
4. Note that the word possession has been marked by Strathern (1990), as well as more recently by Johnson (2014) as partaking of a particularly capitalist, property-oriented, bounded individualist approach to “things,” and as such it should be looked at with suspicion. My own approach (2014) is to invert this relationship by drawing upon the metaphor of spirit possession to understanding the act of possession as a relationship of mutual and dialectical encompassment.
5. There is a risk here of projecting North Atlantic understandings onto both houses and kinship. Houses have no material definition here and could refer to anything from a Nuer windscreen to a Malaysian longhouse to a royal palace. Likewise, we should not imagine that kinship units are clearly defined by the container, as in some societies there is a great deal of circulation between house structures on a daily basis, reflecting overlapping kin roles and exchanges.
6. Many of my interviewees in Abidjan mentioned this same service as their go-to solution.
7. Herring’s account informs us that he is David Tolin, who is an advocate of DSM-V diagnoses of HD and a co-author of various important scientific papers on hoarding disorder (Herring 2014: 11).

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