Loss and material culture in South London

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]abs[This article describes the ways in which people, mainly selected from a single street in South London, utilize material culture in dealing with various experiences of separation and loss, such as death or the ending of a relationship. It starts from a dialectical approach to all relationships as consisting of a tension between idealized and actual categories. It then considers how objects are used to resolve this tension. Two aspects of this process are examined in more detail. The first shows how divestment from objects is used to control and extend the process of separation from persons. The second looks at how objects are used to create an economy of memory and relationships. The article thereby brings older anthropological insights on death and social rupture to bear on individuals within a contemporary metropolitan context.

]p][This article shows how our divestment from objects is central to the process by which the contemporary people of London separate from relationships. It follows from previous research on shopping (Miller 1998; 2001) which demonstrated how the accumulation of objects is used to constitute relationships. There exists a well-established contribution by anthropology to the understanding of death and burial (e.g. Hertz 1960; Huntingdon & Metcalf 1979). The research emphasizes the ways in which societies respond to the rupture caused by death, examining the role of

secondary burial and other rituals and techniques by which long-term social order is imposed upon a biological event. However, these insights have always been applied to non-industrial societies, at the expense of places such as contemporary London, where their relevance is sidelined, in the absence of similarly collective death rituals (Miller & Parrott 2007). This article will argue that such insights prove to be just as significant when it comes to understanding how individuals respond to loss in sites such as London.

]p1[These earlier anthropological traditions in the study of death and mourning, which show the influence of Durkheim (1955 [1912]: 400-6), have been seen as an initial functionalist phase in the history of the discipline, and were subsequently subject to critical reappraisal (see especially Geertz 1973: 162-9). Other approaches considered aspects of longer-term duration without recourse to functionalist assumptions (e.g. Bloch & Parry 1982). Today functionalism is neither popular nor fashionable in anthropology. But we should still allow that some societies do indeed both conceive of and experience death as a disruption to what they see as the larger social body; and that they understand mourning ritual as in some sense a repair to this disruption. Certainly a functionalist perspective of damage and repair was explicitly alluded to by some informants within the study reported here. Functionalism may then become regarded as an observable perspective and response to loss, rather than, as originally conceived, an academic theory of the workings of society *per se*.

]p1[Within the study of death and loss in Britain, the emphasis has turned from society as a collective response to a greater concern with the context and nature of individualism. Strathern (1992: 65-72) has argued for

both analytical and actual detachment between the death of the person and the fate of the relationships that were associated with the deceased, while Mulkay (1993) has noted the way a decline in social relationships can pre-empt death in a context in which death has become rather more drawn-out and predictable. Between these two approaches, Hallam, Hockey, and Howarth (1999*)* have emphasized the need for scholarship on the continuities of social identity as against the death of the body itself.

]p1[Alongside this emphasis upon the individual has developed an interest in the relatively *ad hoc* nature of mourning rituals, especially those associated with the increasing tendency to take home the ashes from cremations (Kellaher, Prendergast & Hockey 2005; Prendergast, Hockey & Kellaher 2006). Where ritual is less formalized, more may depend upon the particular character of the salient relationship, for example how well people got on during life (Hallam & Hockey 2001: chap. 5). Another important question relating to contemporary British death and mourning is the degree to which this kind of academic discussion has itself the capacity to filter down to influence experience. This was certainly the case with the work of Bowlby and Winnicott. But even more recent discussions, which assume the presence of actively continuing bonds with the dead (e.g. Klass, Silverman & Nickman 1996; Walter 1996) as opposed to ever-increasing separation, may already have an influence upon professional counsellors, journalists, and thereby the lay population.

]p1[In certain writings the role of material culture is extensively discussed, with respect to both industrial and non-industrial societies. For example, the use of objects in memorialization and the constitution of memory

is well established (e.g. Küchler & Melion 1991; Kwint, Breward & Aynsley 1999; Lowenthal 1996). Hallam and Hockey (2001) provide a comprehensive discussion of the ways in which memory is materialized and visualized in various media and their consequences in Europe. Watkins (2004: 7) notes that memorialization creates a specific location for remembrance, and in some cases this assertive re-moulding of the physical world may be viewed as offsetting the decay and transience associated with death.

]p1[In this article, we turn from a consideration of memorialization and memory, to focus on an area within which material culture has been relatively neglected, but which has close analogies with more established anthropological contributions to the study of death and burial. That is the gradual separation from and divestment from objects themselves. We will show how the contention of the earlier literature concerning the way people impose control over the sequencing of loss and wrest it from the death as an event is equally applicable to the context of London.

]p1[The material presented here derives from an eighteen-month ethnographic study of households on a street in South London (Miller 2008). The selection of a random street was intended to complement more traditional forms of ethnography. Given the difficulty of identifying relatively discrete ethnographic sites within modern urban conurbations that correspond to concepts of society, culture, or community, there has been a tendency to target populations as representative of social categories such as gender, class, or ethnicity. But this misses the unprecedented degree of cultural heterogeneity of all kinds that characterizes contemporary London. Unlike most US cities, London's minority groups have now dispersed widely from

earlier enclaves (Johnston, Forrest & Poulsen 2002; Peach 1996; L. Simpson 2007).

]p1[The fieldwork consisted of a study of 100 individuals and households, located almost entirely on a South London street (and its side streets) selected for convenience of access, and which as expected contained a broad range of people in terms of class and place of birth. Our participants may be taken as representative of the street, as only eight of the households approached refused to take part. As such the street supports these generalizations about London. Only 23 per cent of our informants were born in London, and yet there was no particular minority group present. A 'typical' household might be a Brazilian married to a Frenchman. Our research also suggested that predetermined parameters of identity may not be the most salient generalizations. For example, although there were thirteen gay individuals represented, we found nothing in common between them relevant to our study. In addition this article cites examples from an initial pilot study of twenty friends and colleagues also based in London.

]p1[Bereavement is one of the most common experiences discussed here, but we conducted quite open-ended fieldwork that gave informants the freedom to present any aspect of loss and separation that they wished to share with us: from mourning a death to being dumped by a girlfriend. So there is no suggestion of starting from the centrality of death itself as, for example, with Ariès (1981) or Seremetakis (1991), since the processes described here seem to apply to the way people use objects to deal with various forms and episodes of loss. Our concern here is less with the cause of

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loss and more with the way objects are utilized in both continuing and ending relationships.

]p1[It was possible that, despite the heterogeneity of the population, we might have been able to make widely applicable generalizations, as was the case for Miller's earlier study of shopping (Miller 1998). It was also possible that we would not find generalizations applicable to common social parameters such as class and age and focus instead on individual creativity and diversity (Kellaher *et al.* 2005; Miller 2008: 282–97; Prendergast *et al.* 2006). But this article reflects the most likely results of such a project: namely a series of mid-level, analytical generalizations with partial correspondence to social distinctions such as gender or ethnicity. They often related more to shared issues: for example, people trying to cope with the sheer quantity of material culture associated with contemporary consumer society. In contrast to older anthropological studies, our fieldwork also had to pay more attention to individual creativity in the construction of personal ritual.

]ha[**The dialectics of relationships**

]p[If we wish to claim that objects are highly significant aspects of the way our informants routinely deal with the loss of relationships, this raises the question of what we mean by the very term 'relationship' (Miller 2007). The perspective used here is derived from Miller's previous study of shopping and the insights it provided on the nature of contemporary kinship (Miller 1998; 2001). Miller argued that most shopping in London is carried out by women on behalf of households. Typically, the item purchased is best understood as something

that helps to mediate the discrepancy between the ideal held of the kinship role occupied by the intended recipient – for example, husband or daughter – and the actual person who occupies that role. A wife may purchase a shirt that a husband will agree to wear that is closer to how she would wish her husband to be, and selected with more care than the shirt he would have purchased for himself. Peanut butter is bought for a child as a compromise between what a child will agree to eat and what is considered healthy for them to eat.

]p1[This argument implies a different focus upon kinship than that commonly applied when anthropologists turn the lens of kinship studies back upon our own societies. Most current work following Schneider (1980), Strathern (1992), and others has been concerned with the way we conceptualize relatedness, and recently with respect to issues such as blood. By contrast, Miller (1998; 2001) found people less interested in principles or ideologies of relatedness and more focused on each specific kinship category (sibling, friend, grandchild, partner, cousin, and parent) as the embodiment of normative ideals against which the individual who filled that role was measured. Shopping focused on the constant dialectic between ideal and actual objectification of each relationship category (Miller 2001: 17-56). For example, most shopping was directed towards the provision of a household, while only token purchases, defined as a treat, were intended directly to fulfil the desires of the individual shopper. This could be achieved even in the case of a single-person household, because the individual when shopping still followed through the same considerations of thrift when provisioning for him- or herself as a household, and still complemented this with one or two special

items that were designated for him or her as the individual shopper who also deserved an occasional treat (Miller 1998: 40-62). The same person is therefore treated both as an exemplification of a normative category, the household, and also as that particular person. The notion of an oscillation between idealized states and those understood as real, here posed in relation to individuals, has parallels with Leach's arguments with respect to the anthropological conceptualization of society. Leach (1970) argued that, in Highland Burma, what we would normally designate as a society actually can oscillate between different idealized conceptions of what a society should be.

]p1[Recently, Miller (2007) used this approach to re-analyse the data presented by Finch and Mason (2000) in their study of inheritance patterns in contemporary Britain. In this book, the authors prefer to follow the arguments that had been put forward by Carsten (1997, see also 2004) and others who have suggested that kinship should be seen as a constant and negotiated process with relatively little by way of fixity. They claim that inheritance choices made in a context of increasingly diverse kinship formations, which follow the rise of divorce and the growing incidence of in step-families, suggest greater fluidity in kin relations. Miller argues, however, that the data they present are also compatible with the dialectical approach to contemporary kinship that he has employed. Their data are striking for the degree to which, notwithstanding the diversity of options and lack of legal constraint, the vast majority of asset provisioning for descendants in England is based on clear rules corresponding to kin position and takes no notice at all of the actual state of relationship with the person occupying that position. So a perfectly awful child, who has consistently behaved badly to his or her

parents, ends up inheriting exactly the same as a conscientious and devoted child, at least with regard to major financial assets. Instead, small tokens of sentimental worth are used to signify the difference in behaviour. The authors are right to point out the complexity of the contemporary family following increased rates of divorce and remarriage, but their data suggest a strong desire to bring the subsequent relationships, such as step-children, back towards the exemplification of basic normative kin categories rather than to exploit or express this new diversity.

]p1[This approach to kinship became important to our study of the loss of relationships since one effect of loss is a change in the balance between the actual and the idealized. The need to focus initially on the specificity of the loved person may give way over time to an emphasis upon one's relationship to this idealized state. Amongst the Buryat it is recognized that a particular person may not have conformed to the personality that is supposed to characterize an individual born, for instance, in the sheep year or hare year. When that person dies, a figure of the animal is placed in the coffin to help correct the anomaly and make them more like the person of the appropriate year (Humphrey 2002: 80). The most obvious example of this in our London street occurs when a deceased individual becomes gradually ancestral by becoming largely remembered with respect to the idealized category. The 'gran' that is communicated to the grandchild is *sans* faults and foibles. 'Gran' is a highly idealized category based on socialized normative models often relayed in the popular media.

]p1[It is not surprising, therefore, that material culture as well as narrative play a central role in making these norms clear. For example, most

of the major divisions in social status and success that occur during life are entirely ignored in the relative homogeneity and equality expressed in most contemporary English grave practice, where the size and quality of the gravestone tell us very little about the social distinctions that pertained to the living. The old clock or washing mangle eventually and effectively turn the deceased gran into a kind of museum figure evocative as much of her period as of herself. The elderly and the dying may even anticipate and perform part of this process themselves. A deceased individual may be gradually reduced to the evocation of one or two key objects. In turn, such a process leads to the simplification of their memorialization to a few treasured states or idealized events.

]p1[Usually this normative or ideal state to which an individual is eventually reduced is seen as positive. But the process can work in the opposite direction. As Shakespeare's Mark Antony says of Caesar, 'The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones' (*Julius Caesar*, Act 3, Scene 2: 76-7). A divorced wife or former girlfriend may be largely recalled as an evil harridan, where any positive features that accounted for the original relationship are expunged in favour of the purity of her supposedly horrid nature. Bob Simpson (1998) describes this tendency as a narrative construct in his ethnography of divorce in Britain. The transformation can be performed even more completely through material divestment. A man left by his wife for another man not only tore up and threw away the clothes his wife painstaking collected 'at his expense', he also carefully removed all those clothes that he saw as representing the style and appearance he took on under her influence. For a while he returned to a

genre of earlier clothes, music, and food that he recalls as his former self. We found this to be rather like re-booting a computer to a date before a virus or other problem corrupted it. Similarly, a man we first interviewed while he was engaged in a relationship confirmed he had scrupulously removed all signs of any prior relationships in order to appease his then partner. When the relationship broke down, we found that many of the less obvious objects that spoke to these earlier relationships had in fact been retained and could now be brought out again. Divestment is not just separation from the now purely negative other, it is also a return to a kind of unpolluted self.

]p1[This act of return can also be performed when what has broken down is the relationship to the self. In one case, heroin addiction had resulted in a virtual loss of the self, certainly of all self-respect, and the absolute loss of all possessions that could be sold for money. It was this man's gradual replacement of his CDs, which could be re-linked to a very precise memory of where he had first heard each track, the return of things his mother had kept secure, and the passing on of his childhood photographs albums that were instrumental in his ability to come back to, if not an ideal state, at least a viable one. As is evident in several of these cases, material culture is as important to this subsequent process of repair as it is for the divestment process, in each case taking people from what they saw as *actual,* back to the relatively *ideal* state of who they should be. The problem with divorce is that so often it is the very same material possessions that might have been employed in this activity of reconstruction of the person that bitterness, conflict, and law make equally ideal as weapons of mutual destruction.

]ha[Divestment

]p[Having established the importance of these dialectics of relationships in more general terms, we now turn to two of the most common ways material culture is employed within this process. The first, divestment, can be compared with various studies of how objects are used in response to experiences of loss and separation elsewhere. An example is the study of funerary monuments in New Ireland by Suzanne Küchler (1988; 2002). Malanggan, well known as museum art works, are wooden funerary monuments which are constructed at the culmination of a long period of ritual designed to ensure that all the social connections of an individual are appropriately severed. As such they exemplify the general theme of the substitution of the unplanned biological death with an ordered and ordained social and ritualized death. In New Ireland the death of the flesh is replaced by the death of the socialized, carved, and painted skin of Malanggan, thereby containing and controlling the disruptive consequences of a demise.

]p1[The construction of Malanggan is the final ceremony in a series of exchanges and destructions that also distribute the material remains that manifest the social presence of the deceased. Previously, mourners have harvested and eaten all the produce of the deceased's gardens. They have burned the relevant hut and have stopped using the person's name. 'The physical separation of body and soul is enacted analogically in performances that, step by step, undo the traces left by a person in the social matrix' (Küchler 2002: 82). These measures are so effective that there is no use made of genealogy, or of individual memory; only the general idea of an ancestor remains.

]p1[There are many parallel accounts of the way material culture is used to signify separation, but often these are discussed with reference to other secular issues such as inheritance, individual as against communal order, and reputation (e.g. Goody 1962; Myers 1986; O'Rourke 2007). More in keeping with Malanggan is Williams's extraordinary account of this process amongst French Gypsies:

>]ex[Nothing should be kept, say the Mānuš. Indeed, the deceased's trailer is set in flames along with its contents, including at times the departed car or truck. Any jewellery or money that has not been given away before his or her death is buried along with the remains or is used to pay for the funeral or to decorate the grave (2003: 4).

]p[But Williams makes this process central to the entire social ontology of that population, which goes well beyond the present concern with the specific use of material culture to mediate the process of separation and loss.

]p1[The sequence of destructive separation documented by Küchler as the socialized response to death closely parallels the way Freud described mourning as the individual's response to the death of a loved one. In what Freud saw as successful mourning, `Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it' (1991 [1917]: 253). He contrasts this description with melancholia, where the same process operates, but where there is an additional aspect of self-denigration and sense of worthlessness since the loss of the external object is experienced as the loss of ego and by implication a possible lack of closure. What is striking about both Malanggan as society in mourning and the

analogy with Freud's account of the individual in mourning is that these are relatively linear sequences with a clear outcome that, if properly followed, satisfactorily accomplishes the healing of the wound without scars. While anthropology may eschew functionalism as theory, it is explicit within psychological intention, and implicit in many social cosmologies.

]p1[The possibility that this model might be applicable to the way metropolitan populations use material culture in responding to loss is illustrated by Layne's (2000; 2002) study of women who suffered from late foetal loss or stillbirths. A principal concern was to demonstrate that what had been lost was not simply a thing, a foetus, but a real person, a relation, a child. The most effective instrument for insisting upon the humanity of the lost person was the material things the women had purchased and were given in expectation of the birth. These were treated as the possessions of the deceased. Separation was extended by the continued inclusion of the lost individual in gifting: buying gifts for what would have been their birthday, or buying for other people's birthdays on behalf of the dead child. It was thereby through consumer goods that bereft parents gave form to the humanity of their child in ways which could not be denied.

]p1[There were many instances within our ethnography that suggested this model could be applied more generally. For example, Elia,[1] of Greek descent, inherited many clothes from her mother, most of which had a double resonance, since they also had been made by her beloved Aunt Dimitra. At first she stored them in a box at the base of her wardrobe. Some she gradually and carefully gave away to others. The recipients had to be 'lovely' people as well as deserving. The origins of each item were made clear and

they were expected to receive them with a sense of reverence. After fifteen years, Elia felt she could begin to wear the clothes. At first she wore them alone in the house; then she started to wear them for special occasions: 'It has to be a posh one, where I can carry it off. When everyone else is wearing £500 to £600 dresses I am wearing one of these'. For Elia the special value of this inheritance was evidenced by the clothes' beauty, their quality, and their ability to trump mere monetary value in the clothes of others. From that point on she always wore something of her mother's or her aunt's when she went to functions, whether a handbag or a scarf. Such things bring the dead and the living into immediate proximity. Through the clothes she can serve her mother: 'You find ways to bring her into social ways and family events, giving a good time to her'.

]p1[With the completion of this process came the feeling that she no longer had to acknowledge the point of origin of an item when it was worn. This realization did not preclude a return to explicit rituals of bereavement in which clothes still evoked the sense of loss:

>]ex[I would say to people: 'Would you like to see my mother's dress?', and there would be a showing. Sometimes I might look at them, but I would be crying. If I was on my own and I would be cuddling them and things like that, I would be crying for those two wonderful women, both for Aunty and for Mummy.[2]

]p[In general, however, the process of divestment had come to what she would see as its natural end. Elia's experience affirms the basic principle of divestment as mourning. We cannot control the way a person is taken away from us in death, but we can control the way we separate from the material

objects that were associated with the dead. Through this material substitution we can allow that process to take time and be carried out in such a way that ultimately we feel we have been better able to come to terms with the death itself. As in almost all our research on loss, little of this process of detachment is prescribed or even particularly noticed. It is something that people creatively develop as their own particular strategy of divestment and separation. The same humility of material culture which makes it invisible to professionals makes it highly adaptable and personally appropriate for such purposes.

]p1[In applying this model to diverse cases, however, it soon became evident that the initial sequence found in Malanggan and Freud is too restrictive. Dubrow (1999: 189-93), for example, argues that there have been various critiques of Freud's linear sequence of separation. She notes that other psychoanalysts, for example John Bowlby (2005) in his work on attachment and loss (although, in general, our study is critical of Bowlby), do see more extended and more complex sequences than that presented by Freud. Hallam and Hockey (2001: 101-27) note that materialization has a dual consequence in that objects we use to control our relation to loss may equally confront us with unwelcome or unexpected reminders of this loss. They point out that with memories, even more than objects, it may not simply be a question of control over divestment, since things may come to haunt us, however hard we try to banish them; thus, as noted in the introduction, they and others have examined continuities as well as divestments in attachments.

]p1[The importance of seeing this as a more nuanced relationship than just a linear sequence of divestment is also suggested by Layne's (2000;

2002) research on parents dealing with stillbirth and late foetal loss. In such cases there is clearly no desire merely to expunge all memory. Rather, objects are used to find ways of continuing the relationship, such as the aforementioned birthday gift-giving on behalf of or to the child who would have been. Similarly, in our fieldwork, mourning may be accomplished as much through the accumulation of objects as through divestment. For example, Mrs Stone, an immigrant from Jamaica, lost her daughter unexpectedly to a hospital infection. Over the next year she devoted herself to accumulating memories of her daughter and in effect constructing a shrine from these in her own home. She was most distressed when relatives failed to respond to her appeal to collect objects and photographs associated with her daughter, especially when she found that the locks had been changed and she could no longer use her key to return to her daughter's house in order to search for such possessions. Objects that her daughter gave her just before her death, such as a gold heart on a chain, increased in significance.

]ex[She gave me this pretty little heart and I said: 'What have I to put this away for?' I said: 'I am going to be wearing this from now on'. I sleep in it, I bathe in it, I do everything in it. She's gone and I'm wearing it. So I've been wearing it every day of my life. I don't take it off.

]p[This wearing of jewellery was not an instant response. For a year after the death Mrs Stone kept this heart and chain carefully in a box, the memories too raw for such things to be in close proximity, and only later did she think about its potential as something that she could constantly wear. Similarly with Mrs Stone, objects accumulated from her deceased daughter allow her some continuity in her role as mother in caring for and looking after her child. Where

the death is more predictable, both Exley (1999) and Walter (1996) note ways in which the dying as well as their families may plan towards such memorialization prior to the death itself.

]p1[Accumulation can then be matched by divestment. For example, Nadine had to face the death of her young daughter in a fire in her flat, a fire which also destroyed all the photographs and household possessions associated with the girl. Initially she couldn't bear to see any images or reminders of her daughter at all; the circumstances were too painful. She echoed the sentiment often evoked by others – what are mere things when a life has been taken away? It was in the second phase that she began to feel the loss of images and objects that could still give respect and form to the life that was lived. She started to collect books and other objects that were preserved because they had been at her daughter's school rather than at home. Divestment became a third phase, taking many years, when finally these associated objects were reduced to those she could place within a briefcase, which she kept in storage, and a single portrait on the wall. It was now important to her that these do not distract from her emphasis upon her other children.

]p1[As in many of these cases, the response to a highly significant loss creates a pattern by which individuals then come to deal with the material culture of the past more generally. In Nadine's case she generally refused other forms of memorabilia and gave away things that might have become sentimental. She placed emphasis upon the renewal of, for instance, the decoration and furnishing of her flat and the disposal of old things. There is no single sequence of distribution and divestment about which we can

generalize, but a complex pattern of accumulation, sorting, and divestment that utilizes objects to help create a long-term, processual relationship to the loss, which can thereby gradually contend with the trauma of the event itself.

]p1[This point might also resonate with recent writing in cultural studies (Eng & Kazanjian 2003) that emphasizes Freud's (or Kristeva's [1989]) theory of melancholia rather than mourning. The argument is that in melancholia the relationship to loss is maintained without closure, or redirected internally. Although it emanates from a depressive and destructive attack on the self, recent writing has suggested it may equally allow for a more dynamic and continuous relationship to loss that is productive (cf. Battaglia 1990: 193-4). Gibson (2004) adds to this discussion the idea of melancholy objects that stand in memory of the process of mourning itself: that is, the loss of loss. In various ways objects may represent, replace, or replicate both the person lost and indeed loss itself. One might have argued, for example, that our research, in bringing people to speak of objects that are otherwise memorialized through silence, shifted the emphasis from mourning to melancholia.

]p1[In general, however, the distinction between mourning and melancholia probably occludes rather than illuminates our findings. Most loss events include elements of both, and both may be extraordinarily creative. In cases such as Elia there is much that is creative in her use of this trajectory of separation, although the experience may also include periodic episodes of depression and abjection. Küchler is equally clear as to the creativity of Malanggan, which I take here as an ethnographic equivalent to our individualized mourning. So a separate consideration of melancholia as advocated in cultural studies seems inappropriate.

]ha[**The economy of relationships**

]p[The second example of how such processes of divestment are used to respond to loss of relationships can be characterised as *the economy of relationships*. In an article on the uses of genealogy amongst the Mongolian Buryat, Humphrey (1979) examines the way the structure of these genealogies accords with the need to legitimate a different relationship to land between sedentarized and nomadic pastoralists. These structures are maintained through a process anthropologists have discussed as `structural amnesia'. For these genealogies the two ends of the line are critical. First there are revered ancestors, from whom the population take their original descent and who remain relatively stable over time. Then there are new ancestors consisting of the recently deceased, of whom people retain memories. Structural amnesia consists of deleting some of those who are now in the middle of the list. They have dropped out of personal memory and are not significant enough to join the ranks of the revered ancestors either. This process allows the overall length of the genealogy to remain fairly constant.

]p1[In a more recent article on the Buryat, Humphrey (2002) adds a material culture perspective. Things for the dead, as for the living, strive for balance between this more generic sense of the past and the specificity of particular pasts, as do the genealogies. Objects that are perhaps too closely associated with the dead as individuals are problematic for these Buddhists, since they may retain for the dead the relationship of desire (see Miller 2005).

Within a collectivist ethos, things are valued that show the patina of human wear in general rather than that of a particular user.

]p1[Clear analogies may be found within these houses in South London. Older people, in particular, might have bought things from flea markets or antique shops that spoke to this generic patina. That is, the objects were old and clearly previously used but there was no knowledge of any particular prior user (Gregson & Crewe 2003). Such activities shift their engagements from specific to more generic pasts. Though rather less problematically than for the Buryat, most people possessed personal and specific possessions from relationships that were no longer extant. The objects themselves can help develop this transition from the specific to the generic. For example, one informant had a tin box on a shelf from the First World War. It was evident that this box stood at one level for the specific ancestry of his grandfather, but at other levels it stood first for British history and then for history itself.

]p1[For these households, as for the Buryat, there are various ways in which people tie together these two ends of cosmological and specific memorialization. Their version of this structural amnesia might be called 'the economy of relationships'. Without it, people are flooded with ever-increasing reminders of past relationships. It is a process well described by Marcoux in an article called 'The refurbishment of memory' (2001), based on a study of people moving house in Montreal. Although moving is normally considered traumatic and difficult, Marcoux examines one of the positive consequences of house-moving, in that it provides an opportunity to go through possessions and bring them up to date. Deciding which things to take to the next home

creates an occasion for revaluating which past (or present) relationships still matter. 'Moving becomes a means to reshuffle relationships and memories by bringing them back into consciousness, by making them explicit and for deciding which ones to reinforce, which ones to abandon or put on hold' (Marcoux 2001: 83).

]p1[In South London what was striking was the sensitivity with which this economy of relationships was accomplished. For example, one householder evidently cared about how the living room served as a mirror of the value she could be seen to place on relationships. The living room was stuffed full of mementoes and photographs that related to friends and family. She loved to receive new objects from their holidays or from family events. But even she and her relatively large living room could not cope with the sheer quantity of stuff that accumulates. The room, therefore, had many images that spoke to recent events and current relationships. It also had many objects and photos that related to the deceased or to relationships in other ways lost. Since the room was effectively now full, she had constantly to remove objects in the middle ground that no longer signified recent events. At the same time a few were retained that had the capacity to stand in their singularity for relationships that were once signified by a plethora of changing objects.

]p1[The end-point of this sequence was illustrated in the home of an elderly woman, Dora. We carried out an inventory of all the objects found in her living room. On reflection these turned out to be a résumé of her full life. One of the most poignant was the bright red piggy bank that she still filled with twenty pence coins. When full it contained fifty pounds which could be spent;

a routine that reminded her of her origins in poverty. There was one photo of her as a little girl, living a life made hard from birth when her father was gassed in the trenches in the First World War, and another photo of her as a girl guide. There was just one table inherited from her mother, and from the period when she first worked was her sewing machine, also a decorated box and a valance from the Jewish family who ran the alteration shop where she was employed. There was a picture of the first wedding dress she made for herself, six decades ago, that saw its counterpoint in several examples of needlework from recent years.

]p1[Though she had the two engagement rings from her two marriages, few possessions remained from the first marriage, which was mired in poverty; only the government condolence letter for her husband's death during the Second World War. From the second marriage, which took her to Portugal and Spain, she had a table, a carpet, and a Portuguese ornament. She displayed a photo of herself with her husband at a dinner party, another of one of his ancestors, and a decorated box from his family. Following his death she left most of their lavish belongings to his family, returning to England to unpack some of those things she had saved on her own account. Of these she treasured the stylish cutlery, egg cups, and silver cups from a high-class London shop. With the thrift that was reflected in her piggy bank she would buy pieces of cutlery one at a time until she reached five, when the manager would give her the sixth for free. She had a certificate from the ambulance service she worked with during the war, and a photo of the luncheon room where she worked afterwards for twenty-five years, ending with a certificate of freedom from the City of London, where the luncheon

room was sited. There was a picture from when she looked really good in the 1960s, a photo of a close friend, a letter from Mrs Thatcher, and a picture from a holiday in France. There is no reason to imagine that Dora intended this résumé effect. It is rather the result of this economy of relationships, such that each significant relationship, whether to persons or periods and events of her past, ultimately becomes reduced to just one or two objects as other mementoes make way for other relationships. Clearly the more relationships one has lived through, the more any one relationship has to be pruned back to one or two totalizing mementoes in the performance of economy.

]p1[From a material culture perspective, relationships are not limited to persons. For Dora the significant relationship might also be to one's work, one's childhood, a place, a sport, or to an aesthetic interest. One Irish couple, who had retired from a life of owning pubs, recognized that the photographs and images on display were so numerous that they joked there was no need to paint since you could not see the colour of the walls behind. On careful inspection it emerged that the relationships were grouped around themes. One cluster related to their lives as publicans. There was another area that was effectively a Catholic shrine of religious images. Yet another was dedicated to the educational qualifications of relatives. But as well as kin there was also a small area which preserved mementoes to deceased customers, some of whom, one came to realize, ended their lives with no one else to remember them but the landlords of their favourite pub. Sports, weddings, Irish Republican heroes, childhood, and holidays all constituted additional genres of relationships that jostled for room within an economy constituted essentially by the size of space available for explicit memorialization.

]p1[Likewise, the materiality of each of the genres of material objects is often employed to determine the temporality of divestment. On the street, as with Marcoux's research, people may prefer passively to separate from things associated with a relationship when moving house, rather than actively to throw out these objects. The wearing out of clothes may make a complementary contrast to the fixity of jewellery. But there are many quite subtle strategies. For example, Lucy, in her twenties, knew that music played a critical role in her memory of past relationships. If need be she would play a specific track over and over again until she was completely sick of it and found it irritating, in order to pre-empt the way it would otherwise have worked as an involuntary reminder of a relationship she was now trying to distance herself from. Parrott (2007) has examined the contrasting qualities of music, photographs, and clothing, all of which can take on different roles in this process of divestment. Of particular importance may be the point made by Drazin and Frohlich (2007) on photographs not simply as memory but as reminders of an obligation to remember.

]p1[An economy of relationships is also starting to develop in relation to digital information such as keeping emails and mobile phone texts. It is now common to clean these up periodically, often keeping just sentimental or special examples. Overall our material suggests that texts may be more ephemeral than emails, but not necessarily, as a young woman who periodically typed out her most treasured texts demonstrated. One man who had been unexpectedly left by his partner of five years could not bear either to look at or to delete retained emails. In fact he exploited our project to give us the emails and digital photographs in question, as a way of finally separating

from such materials. It is too early to draw clear models of the effects of digitization as against other material and immaterial divestments from loss but it is already having a profound impact as a sequence of storage and deletion.

]p1[Just as with the Buryat, it seemed that for many people the economy of relationships that starts with one's most immediate ancestors could have at the other end a set of objects likely to move finally to the more stable and conserved arena corresponding to sacred ancestry. Mostly this occurred if there was some cultural category that acted to sacralize objects. For example, in some Jewish homes the separation of objects brought out annually for the festival of Passover seemed to be used to take certain inherited objects and recategorize them as sacred to this occasion. They are thereby preserved longer, since they are only used once a year. More generally, for English families the critical moment was whether an inherited object could change status sufficiently to become an heirloom. As Finch and Mason (2000: 152-4) note, it is quite common for the older generation to devise strategies in the hope that some of their possessions will become heirlooms, but in practice most of the recipients of inheritance decline this final process of sacralization and few objects actually become heirlooms. So the reduction of things to one or two objects that then stand for longer-term, inter-generational transference also seems to exemplify this overall process of the economy of relationships.

]ha[**Conclusion**

]p[Although this article began with a sympathetic nod to functionalism as a perspective shared by many informants, the emphasis has been neither on

the repair of the individual *per se* nor on society. Rather the focus is upon the relationship, which is not that surprising, since in terms of both the material objects and persons, the concern is with the loss or retention of relationships. We began by outlining a dialectical approach to relationships, from which it could be seen that the divestment from objects may be used, following the loss of a relationship, to shift our memory from a focus on the actual to the idealized or demonized aspects of that relationship. This process may then utilize either or both of the two more detailed variants that were subsequently discussed. For example, the economy of relationships means that one quickly divests oneself of the elements of a person that one needs to expunge. People tend not to keep objects pertaining to their parents' long decline through Alzheimer's or incapacitation through illness. Nor do they hang on to the traces of the ten years of estrangement that occurred when they were not reconciled to the man they married. Instead they retain a few photos that reflect the wedding, the holidays, the moments when the relationship came closest to its ideal (Goffman 1979). Ideal states used to be represented by romantic, often gendered, ideals. Deceased males are often memorialized by other males in terms of technology: tools of their trade as a carpenter, their cricket bat, or their best fly-fishing rod. These are objects which help fuse the memory of the specific ancestor with the idealized conceptualization of a man, especially the working man. A woman is more likely to be recalled through the tokens of her love and care that equally make her the generic woman. The same relationship to ideals in persons would be true of lost connections to places and things, as in the homeland represented by idealized souvenirs and postcard pictures rather than poverty.

]p1[The process also works in the reverse direction. Just as people who have been lost become transformed into generic and idealized ancestors by those left behind, so may the older generation seek to pass on objects that they hope will influence their descendants. By bequeathing these objects before they die, they hope to help their descendants become more like they would wish them to be. For example, a religious parent may bequeath sacred objects to his or her children that, alongside his or her admonishments while still alive, are intended to secure a greater degree of religious observance amongst these descendants. This replaces a past English practice of having a codicil in the will that only allowed inheritance if the descendant properly conformed to the wishes of the dead. In transnational families, such as that of a South London-born woman with a Nigerian father and Irish mother, it may be the final burial wish or command to build a house in a place of origin by a migrant parent that serves to assert the importance of an ethnic identity to Anglicized descendants: 'Dad knew what he was doing', responded this woman.

]p1[An important insight gained by viewing relationships as a dialectic is that none of these processes starts at the moment of loss. In many ways the processes described here as following upon the end of a relationship can be viewed as a refinement or completion of the logic of the relationships themselves. As the previous study of shopping suggested, there is already a constant dialectic between the other person as an objectification of the category of relationship and as a particular and specific personality. This is what relationships are (Miller 2007). The tension between the specific and the generic accounts for most purchases. When the relationship is lost, then both

divestment and the economy of relationships may be employed to further this process, mainly moving now from the actual to the ideal, since it is unconstrained by any active response from the subject of the relationship. The bad behaviour of a young child accompanying shopping mitigates against the struggle for idealization (Miller 2001: 33-40). By contrast, a deceased relative has little protection against being either idealized or vilified.

]p1[This approach to relationships as dialectical originally derived from a study of object accumulation rather than divestment, and several cases in this article show that these are really two aspects of the wider relationship. As with Mrs Stone dealing with the death of her daughter, and in the work of Layne (2002), both accumulation and the continuity of certain bonds (as in Klass *et al.* 1996) may be interwoven with, or oscillate with, a long-term process of divestment and separation. Indeed this is equally true of current relationships which utilize accumulation but also various forms of *ridding* (Gregson 2007). Material culture, because of the way it externalizes these processes, helps us to clarify and understand these different aspects of loss. It may therefore assist in the construction of an anthropological, as opposed to a psychological, approach to this process.

]p1[The intention behind creating such an anthropological perspective is different from the treatment of loss and the creation of models in psychology that have medicalized normative and prescriptive patterns (for quite a comprehensive view of these, see Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe & Schut, 2001). Such models have tried to impose the idea of certain set stages by which people are supposed to experience properly and then recover from loss, as though it was some kind of illness (Bradbury 1999). Here, by contrast,

anthropology can respect the specificity of each example of loss. Similarly, in a future book-length treatment of this topic we would hope to include complexities, ambivalence, and contradictions that cannot be captured in a single academic article. For example: how people apply the experience of one loss to subsequent episodes of loss; how to assess the influence parents have on loss experiences without reducing this to the determinant qualities assumed of that relationship in so much psychology and psychoanalysis; and the more positive ways in which people see themselves develop and change as a result of the way they deal with loss.

]p1[Readers will no doubt think of additional factors and of their own experiences that could be added to those described here. But by simplifying and generalizing, certain concluding points may be emphasized. The first is that, as in the earlier work on shopping and accumulation, we would argue that the study of material culture is at least as effective a route to the anthropological study of relationships as any attempt to encounter relationships directly, which is the approach adopted in more conventional studies of kinship.

]p1[A second point necessitates a return to the initial methodology. There are important reasons behind attempting an ethnography of a street which, in the context of the heterogeneity of contemporary London, forces the researcher into encounters with people who would never fit pre-given categorizations of identity or social descriptors used to delineate particular populations for study. Yet, as this article demonstrates, it remains possible to construct generalized models around particular topics ofinquiry, while recognizing that these may manifest themselves in various ways depending

upon cultural trajectories. Differences in the text have been related to Jewish as against Irish custom, and others could be related to social parameters such as class, or other distinctions such as gender. The influence of these specific traditions does not preclude more general changes, for example the tendency to bring cremated ashes home, which makes a new diversity in *ad hoc* rituals of separation possible (see Kellaher *et al.* 2005, Prendergast *et al.* 2006). The intention is neither to assume the significance of such sociological distinctions, nor to avoid them where there is evidence they are salient to the topic of analysis.

]p1[Finally, the article confirms one of the main insights that the anthropological literature, including the earlier functionalist literature, has bequeathed to the study of death and loss, and which is shown here to be equally pertinent to the study of contemporary capitalist society (Hertz 1960; Huntingdon & Metcalf 1979). We cannot control and often cannot predict loss as an event, whether this is the death of a relative, or being left by a partner. It is not surprising therefore that one of our main responses is to enact a much more gradual sequence of divestment and separation that, relatively speaking, we may feel we can control. In some places, this is largely a socially normative process, as in the Malanggan of New Ireland or amongst the Buryat. In a site such as London, however, the quantity of material culture that may be retained with respect to any given relationship, and the heterogeneous cultural context, mean that we may enact many more individual strategies of divestment of our own devising. Nevertheless, one of our aims is to employ anthropology to help professionals acknowledge the processes that populations construct for themselves in their struggles to deal

with loss. For this purpose, it is, we hope, useful to construct the kind of

generalized models and theories presented in this article.

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[1] Please note that all informants' names are pseudonyms and occasionally

details are changed to protect anonymity.

[2] For the potential of clothes in relation to memory and mourning, see Jones &

Stallybrass (2000) and Stallybrass (1993).

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