Identity, mobility and the throwaway society

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Abstract

This paper provides a critique of the concept of the throwaway society. Drawing on two years of intensive qualitative research, we argue that the concept of the throwaway society does not bear scrutiny. Rather than throwing things away, households are shown consistently to engage in simultaneous practices of saving and wasting when getting rid of consumer objects. Saving and wasting are shown to be critical to materialising identities and the key social relations of family and home. Focusing on self, the couple relation and the mother-child relation, we show how wasting things is intimately connected to the narration of self and to the enactment of specific love relations. The paper also shows how wasting things is central to moving home, constituting a surplus and then an excess of household possessions. The paper concludes by arguing that to understand the increasing amount of matter being turned to waste in the UK requires a focus on love relations and mobility, and not on the trajectories of things themselves.

1: Introduction

The starting point for this paper is a startling research finding. Startling in two respects: first, because it challenges one of the most widespread, commonsensical and populist understandings of contemporary consumer culture, that we live in a throwaway society (Barr, 2004; Cooper, 2003, 2005; Cooper and Mayers, 2000; Strasser, 1999, cf. O'Brien, 1999; Hawkins and Muecke, 2003); and secondly because it testifies to the pervasive presence of second-hand and hand-me-down/around economies in the practices of everyday life in UK households (Clarke, 2000; Gregson and Crewe, 2003). It is that, in the course of two full years of intense investigation of UK household disposal, only 29% of discards were routed in the direction of the waste stream, whereas 60% were either given away to charity, friends and family, or sold. Surprise, incredulity, amazement and disbelief are some of the responses this finding has elicited, even when tempered by an important qualification: that the research did not include the leftovers and detritus of food consumption, packaging, bottles and food waste for example, and neither was it concerned with another major category contributor to the volume of household waste, those 'disposable' goods that are the primary means to maintaining bodily hygiene and cleanliness (Shove, 2003). Instead, our concerns were with ordinary, everyday consumer objects; with the things that fill our homes, like television sets, furniture and furnishings, small and large appliances, toys, beds and bedding, books and games. Whilst such things may not be designed to be wasted, in the manner say of a disposable nappy, paper tissue or plastic bag, they include some of the most iconic instances of the connections between contemporary consumption and imperatives to waste. Analogue cameras and televisions, the cassette player and the Walkman, for instance, have all been rendered either redundant or obsolete by the advent of new digital technologies and by developments in the formatting and availability of recorded music. Functional they may be, until the signal is switched off, or manufacturers cease to produce film, but these are things whose social lives are in flux. They are losing the aura and the lustre of the new; no longer constituted by producers (be they manufacturers, retailers or even public broadcasting institutions) as the means to enacting particular consumption practices, such as domestic photography or television viewing, they are becoming problematic objects through which to constitute particular consumer identities. They are, in short, transitional goods, on the way to becoming of rubbish value (Thompson, 1979). Another classic example is the associations drawn between domestic appliances (small and large), manufactured obsolescence and 'waste mountains', be they refridgerators, freezers or bag-fill vacuum cleaners. Here then, in the intersections of the domestic with technology, fashion and consumer cultures, lies both the evidence – seemingly incontrovertible – and the apparent explication for consumption's intrinsic wastefulness, and for the throwaway society (Packard, 1961; Cooper, 2003; Huyssen, 1995). Except that this research consistently refused to bear this out. Be it the 59 households and 150 individuals living in the Midlands that comprised one part of the study, or the 16 households and 38 individuals who participated in a parallel ethnographic investigation in North east England, the same general tendencies were disclosed. That is, whilst people certainly did get rid of consumer objects via the waste stream, they also went to considerable lengths to pass things on, hand them around and sell them, and – just as often – quietly forgot about them, letting them linger around in back stage areas such as garages, lofts, sheds and cellars, as well as in cupboards and drawers (Fisher and Shipton, 2003).

These findings, and the responses to them, suggest immediately that terms such as the throwaway society are used all too glibly, and that academics are no different to the rest of the population in their capacity to be taken in by seductively simple, commonsensical explanations. The throwaway society thesis however, confuses act and process. It conflates the act of discarding with what discarding achieves, socially and culturally. Further, it refuses to acknowledge that discarding (the act) is a spatially, socially and economically differentiated process, one that can be anticipated to connect in myriad ways to the making of social relations, identities and distinction. Moreover, to confuse act with process matters profoundly, particularly given that discarding, and particularly discarding as waste, is a charged act, increasingly one of the primary means through which people articulate both an ethics of care and moralities of practice, often drawing on the notion of a throwaway society in the process.

The paper provides a grounded empirical examination of the process of discarding (cf. Hetherington, 2004). In this our intent has clear affinities with Simpson's (1998) study of divorce. Simpson comments:

> "… the absence of good ethnographic research on a politically loaded
> topic makes it difficult to separate what is actually happening from the fog
> of ideological pronouncements about what might be happening or, as is
> more often the case, what pundits feel should be happening on the
> ground" (ibid, p. 28).

Such comments are equally applicable to the 'fog' that surrounds pronouncements on the throwaway society, its effects, and what might be done to avert this. Taking a material culture approach to our research materials, and drawing on recent literature in this field on acquisition and consumption (Miller, 1998, 2001), we show, on the one hand, how discarding goods is as infused with love and care as the process of acquisition. Indeed, in Section 2, we demonstrate how discarding things relates fundamentally to the constitution of identities, specifically to the narration of the self (2.1), the couple (2.2), and the mother-child relation (2.3). On the other hand, and taking as a special case the rather different instance of moving house, we show (Section 3) how the process of discarding relates to contemporary mobility. We argue that, whilst moving generates excess, discarding goods here is enacted with similar degrees of care and concern, guilt and anxiety. It might look carefree, but actually is not. Taken together, these findings cast considerable doubt on the command of the throwaway society. We close the paper, in Section 4, by reflecting further on the difficulties with this term, and caution against its use as a means to understanding the connections between consumption, disposal and waste generation.

2: Self, identity and getting rid of things

In this and the following section we focus primarily on specific instances from our research in which participants engaged clearly in acts of throwing things away, turning things to waste by placing them in trajectories that moved them clearly into the waste stream, in some instances to a degree that might appear excessive.[1] Our

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[1] For comparative purposes we draw consistently here on the 59 participating households living in Nottingham, a city in the English Midlands. Households were recruited in roughly equal proportions from four neighbourhoods; three of these are inner city and one suburban. One of the inner city neighbourhoods (Castle View) is decidedly affluent, lived in by the professional middle classes and retired well-off people. Another (Player Fields) is multi cultural, with high levels of benefit dependency. The third inner city neighbourhood (Raleigh Heights) has high levels of student

argument here is that to read such acts of throwing away literally, to see them as indicative of care's absence, and as evidence for a throwaway society is to confuse act with process. Rather, we reveal that acts of throwing away are frequently anxiety-laden, as well as fundamentally constitutive of and expressive of relations of care, concern and specifically love.

That this might be so is already intimated by the substantial research literature on consumption. That objects have the capacity to provoke anxieties in us is acknowledged to be one of the primary drivers of contemporary consumption and consumerism, albeit that this is a capacity mediated by various forms of capital, cultural, economic and social. Typically, such anxieties have been explored in terms of the processes that shape the acquisition of consumer goods (see Clarke and Miller, 2002; Madigan and Munro, 1996; Skeggs, 1997; Woodward, 2005). But this is not to say that anxieties are any less potent in the context of those consumer objects that are thoroughly incorporated within particular consumption practices in the home (Warde, 2005; Gregson, 2006). Consumer goods, then, can become unwanted things, as well as troublesome or ambivalent presences in our homes. Examples include unworn clothing maybe, or 'old' but still functioning technologies such as video recorders and first generation mobile phones. Other examples include the sorts of things that have been held over and stored, kept for their capacity to do memory work and to narrate a previous life or of a life that has been lived, but which are now deemed sufficiently cooled to be released (McCracken, 1988; Mara, 1998). They encompass too those things that come to be seen to be 'not me', as 'no longer me' and as the 'not-the-me-I-would-like-but-struggle-to be' or which seemed a good purchase at the time but rapidly come to be understood as mistakes, or even delusions: cutlery and furniture left over from a student life; the token piece of minimalist design bought because of the momentary seductions of a life without clutter; the clothes of a younger, thinner, pre-children embodiment. And they include those things that generate feelings of uncertainty in us. We might like them, love them even, but there may be something about them (or us) that isn't quite right. The funky shoes that hurt our feet. The wicked sunglasses that don't actually suit us. Alternatively, we might hate these things, but something about them – usually their social lives – commands that they be kept within our homes; the hideous gifts from aged relatives for example. Anxiety here is an anxiety of possession; a sense that someone, somewhere else, could be a more appropriate keeper/custodian of such things, precisely because they can be imagined to be able to put them to use or to revalue them in some way. But troublesome things such as these can also become unwanted things. The presumption of the throwaway society thesis is that these sorts of things are merely thrown away; once no longer wanted they are tossed, lobbed or jettisoned in the direction of the waste stream without a second thought. To argue this, however, is to overlook how goods entwine with, constitute and materialise particular identities, as well as to assume that such entanglements can be unravelled at a stroke and without a care. The unequivocal evidence from this research is that such assumptions are a long way from

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occupancy. The fourth – suburban – area (Trent View) is a large swathe of estate housing, of the type typically associated with families. The 59 households span the full range of UK household income bands, employment categories, age ranges, housing structures and housing tenures, and include households with and without children, married and cohabiting, single, widowed and separated/divorced. Each household was visited four times over the course of their twelve months of research participation, with interviews focusing on the things households had got rid of in the intervening period and any associated object stories.

accurate; that the casting of things in the direction of the waste stream is as productive of identities as the more well-worn terrain of acquisition and possession; and that such acts are a very long way from what they appear to be, namely care-free.

2.1: Dis-identification, object stories and narratives of the self
There are legions of examples of the process of thing dis-identification that we could potentially draw on from the research, but to frame our discussion we highlight to begin with the goings-on in two households that are socially and economically at a considerable remove from one another. In so doing we are using a clear methodological tactic to make a point. Although these two households are poles apart on a whole host of standard sociological and socio-economic criteria, and in terms of their dispositions and orientations toward consumption, they nonetheless demonstrate how the process of discarding connects up to materialising identities, notably those of the self and the couple, as well as key social relations, of family and generation.

Paul and Sarah are a high-income, early forties, white, professional couple; both work in the private sector. They live in a mansion house flat in the Castle View area, do not have children and are high investors in both interior design and up-market fashion. Nonetheless, they – and particularly Sarah – continue to value the bargain. Although they might be considered by some to typify a particular set of investments in consumption, in that they had recently had their kitchen gutted and re-designed when we first met them and, during the course of the research, had their bathroom completely renovated and bought a new top of the range BMW, they also routinely use their respective families as conduits to get rid of certain things. During the year of their research participation, a microwave, an SLR camera, a kettle, a computer monitor and an integrated espresso-filter coffee machine were all discarded by passing them on to various family members. The majority of these things were replaced by new technologies, for example a flat screen monitor and a digital camera. In contrast, their old bathroom fixtures and fittings - described as 'a horrendous green colour', 'ancient, at least 20 years old', and as 'mucky', 'leaking' and 'dirty' - were carried away by the bathroom fitters, with no pretence either to care or to speculate about their future, almost certainly landfill. On other occasions, however, things were discarded differently. On our second visit to Paul and Sarah's home, Sarah recounted the practices of clothing management in their household, describing her routine of going through her wardrobes methodically twice a year, taking things out and evaluating them. This is a practice which she seems to regard as normative, and one which she therefore expects Paul to participate in as well, with his clothing. Our second visit to this household occurred shortly after one such evaluation of cloth. 'Grotty old t shirts', 'old' sportswear and the 'over-washed' and 'colour-drained' were all 'lobbed' in the bin. Other things, however, went to a charity shop. Amongst the things that were released in this direction were what Sarah described as 'a groovy coat' and a linen suit, both hers and both in fine physical condition. The groovy coat was one that Sarah really liked but, as she is prepared to admit, the trouble was 'I'd seen too many really boring people wearing it [...] too many frumpy women wearing it'. The problem with the linen suit was more complex. Described as 'too big', 'didn't suit me', 'not smart enough' and as 'creasing too much', Sarah wonders aloud why indeed she had ever bought it. Later on she discloses that the colour too was a problem; the suit was purple, not black or navy (see Clarke and Miller, 2002). Both these clothing rejections testify to the importance of difference, style and fit to Sarah's identity in cloth; looking different from other ('frumpy') women matters to her.

Equally though, looking different carries risks. It can threaten other identities, notably the professional executive woman; to wear crumpled-in-purple is acknowledged as an attempt to carry difference too far. The purple linen suit then, disrupts Sarah's self narrative, but the purchase of this suit is also a source of anxiety. Why and how, she asks herself, could she have allowed herself to buy something she now sees as so utterly inappropriate to the performance of her working self?

Florence is also early forties, black and a single parent living with her early twenties son in a 'council semi' in the Player Fields area. She has lived here for 20 years. Initially, most of the things in Florence's house came from her mother, whom she criticised at the time as obsessed with the new, and who seemed to be continually passing her unwanted things on to Florence. As Florence now appreciates, what her mother was actually doing was using her ability to afford to buy new to release to Florence the things she saw as essential in order for Florence to make a comfortable home for her and her then young son. And indeed, Florence herself engaged in precisely these practices during our research, buying the new in order to pass things on to her cousin. Florence also routinely passes things on to charity shops, particularly local charities, which matter to her. For example, in the course of the research and prompted by having her loft insulated, she cleared out the contents of her attic. Much of what exited the house on this occasion was the material culture of her son's childhood, his toys, his clothes, his first reading books and an old rocking horse. Although Florence kept one of his teddies (his favourite one when he was a child), she gave the rest either to her sister (for her children) or to a local community charity. In a similar vein, the redecoration of her living room, just prior to her research participation, saw the release of a large number of ornaments, many of them either unwanted gifts (from people who had subsequently died) or no longer considered to be appropriate collections. All these things went to a charity shop. Like Sarah and Paul, Florence also routinely goes through her wardrobes. On our second visit to her home she related how she had been 'ruthless' with her clothes. Things that had not been worn in the past six months and things that she knew she will never get in again have all gone: 'why on earth am I keeping them if I know I'm not going to lose the weight; enough is enough – get rid!'. All such items were placed in a bag and taken to a local charity shop. The exception was a sequined ball-gown, bought for a special occasion fund-raising event organised by her cousin and worn once. This dress had lingered around in Florence's wardrobe for some years. Declared 'never to be worn again', it had somehow exceeded Florence's capacities to know what to do with it. On this occasion though, she finally discarded it, by passing it back to her cousin, 'or Gloria Gaynor as I call her'. At the same time, Florence's son had also got rid of a similar number of clothes from his wardrobe; 'an old fashioned suit', 'two nice jackets', 'old jumpers – V necks not Polos'; 't shirts – didn't like the design on them', jeans – 'too wide legs – you know what young lads are like!'. Nonetheless, and notwithstanding all these instances of attempting to pass on and revalue the household's discards, Florence also got rid of various things via the waste stream. A 14-year old microwave that 'just went pow and that was that' was one such item. Described as 'having served its time', Florence placed it on top of the bin, uncertain as to what to do with it, but witnessed the bin men throwing it in the back of the waste collection vehicle. Early on, when we first met her, she was in the throes of getting rid of a wardrobe. Chosen for her son for 'his first proper bedroom', this was described as having 'served its time' – 'one of the doors fell off and it never got put back on, the rods inside aren't working properly and the fronts of the dressing table bit keep

coming unglued'. The wardrobe was collected by the council bulky waste collection service, and was replaced with a new pine bedroom suite, a birthday present from Florence to her son. Somewhat later on in the research, Florence threw both a rug and a mobile phone in the bin. The stories here are as follows. The rug was cream and had been in the living room. Somehow it got stained, with spilt Ribena©. Florence had tried, but failed, to wash the stain out. Eventually, she says, 'It just looked so tatty so I got rid of that. I got fed up with seeing it'. The mobile phone is something that let Florence down badly when she was away in London, trying to deal with a family emergency. At a time of great emotional stress, she found the phone would not allow her to dial or text; neither could other family members get in touch with her. When she got back, Florence's son tried to get it repaired but was told it was impossible, so Florence threw it in the bin.

The various disposal acts that occurred within these two households over the course of the year of their research participation demonstrate that getting rid of things is not simply a matter of wasting but continually about the simultaneous play between saving and wasting. On the one hand, certain acts of discarding are intrinsically about wasting things. In certain circumstances, then, to make things waste is clearly seen to be appropriate; for example, where the patina of age and use has become unattractive, as with Paul and Sarah's 'old, mucky' bathroom, a litany of worn-out or over-washed garments and where things have literally fallen apart, as with Florence's son's wardrobe. In others, notably with Florence's microwave, there is more uncertainty, anxiety even, over turning things to waste; not over discarding, for this is something that is seen to have 'served its time', but over whether such matter can even, should even, be placed in the bin, presumably because of vaguely felt but barely understood concerns over environmental effects. On the other hand, as we see, discarding is simultaneously concerned with saving, from the bin and from waste. Paul's camera, the couple's coffee maker, kettle and computer monitor, Sarah's groovy coat and suit, Florence's ball gown, her son's and her clothing, her ornaments and the material culture of her son's childhood all illustrate how acts of discarding as saving work to produce social relations and identities, primarily of family, home and self. Such parallel acts of saving and wasting went on across all of the households participating in this research. As we show now, what is at stake here is the endless narration of self and identity through what is done with and to the world of consumer goods.

In both Paul and Sarah's and Florence's households we see clearly not just the importance of particular sorts of consumer goods to the narration of the self but the importance of the capacities of certain objects to disrupt, destabilise and indeed threaten these self-narratives. Evidently, as with Paul and Sarah's bathroom, Florence's mobile phone and her son's wardrobe, these capacities are bound up in part in the physical lives of things; their aging and their perceived deterioration in time affects their capacity to do certain things, capacities in turn that allow us to narrate a sense of ourselves as particular people. So, physicality is never pure: rather it is intrinsically bound up in the social lives of things (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986; Dant, 1999; Norris, 2004; Tranberg Hansen, 2000), and part of the trouble with this wardrobe, for example, is that its physical state no longer has the capacity to narrate Florence's love for her son. Indeed, its physical deterioration works to suggest the reverse; a collapsing wardrobe stands potentially as a metaphor for a declining love. To rid here, to make waste, and to purchase the new wardrobe gift, then, is the means through which Florence is able to continue to narrate herself as an appropriate, loving

and caring mother, and to materialise this love, through what she does with particular objects. Noticing the state of the 'old' wardrobe; organising its disposal; replacing it with the new, that is also an appropriate gift for an adult son, all allow her to constitute herself as and narrate herself as an appropriate, caring, loving mother. Equally however, the capacity of things to disrupt and destabilise the narration of the self is not just bound up in the capacities of things or indeed their social lives, but precisely because things have the capacity to threaten this self, through their disclosure of the co-presence of another, more troublesome, self. It is against this background that the cream rug story becomes significant. Here we see how the physical state of things can testify to a lack, in this case of appropriate care for things. In a manoeuvre which is straight out of Mary Douglas (1966), the rug's contamination with Ribena threatens the social order of Florence's home; its respectability, indeed Florence's social respectability, is threatened by the visible stain that discloses care's temporary absence. Having tried, and failed, to clean the rug, to restore order, and respect, Florence is required to cast it out and make it waste, for who could possibly find value in such a rug? And it is against the same background that we need to situate Sarah's routine monitoring of the contents of her wardrobes, as a practice that attempts to be vigilant against the constant presence of the troublesome self in cloth. When Sarah gets rid of her 'groovy coat' and purple linen suit, then, she is not just getting rid of clothing mistakes but of physical configurations in cloth whose presence testify to the extent of her desire for difference, and the impossibility of its attainment. And when Florence tells herself to 'get rid' of clothes that she knows she will never manage to squeeze her body into, it is a similar materialisation of the desired but known to be unattainable self that she is attempting to get rid of, by moving cloth along.

Taken together, these various acts of getting rid of things might appear at first sight to be emblematic of a throwaway society, in that they are about the clear binning and/or getting rid of things that have a use value left in them. But, as we have shown, they are actually acts that are critical to the performance and regulation of the self and a fundamental part of identity work. Indeed, we would argue that to throw away (certain sorts of) things is an intrinsic part of contemporary being; a way of narrating ourselves through the presence *and* absence of consumer goods. Clearly, this is not, as so much of the literature on consumption assumes, just about the presence/absence of particular things but a presence/absence that fundamentally entwines the capacities of things with the ongoing narration of the self. How things are, which is not just about how they appear to be visually, but includes their known social lives and physical capacities, not only reflect on us but tell stories about us, to us as well as to others. And these object stories evidently have the capacity to tell discordant narratives; narratives that might diverge from those that we might want to tell about ourselves, and to narrate different stories to those that we anticipated them telling, or that they once might appear to have told. Getting rid of these things, by ensuring that they are turned to waste or by moving them on through other conduits, is a means of getting rid of these troublesome and/or unwanted narratives; a means of harmonising the relation between self and the co-present object world of consumer goods in our homes, albeit only momentarily. For, as we saw with Paul and Sarah and Florence, this is a relation that requires repetitive work and indeed monitoring, just to maintain. That such acts of throwing away should be commonplace is unsurprising, then. Indeed, their presence and the object absences they make are part of the ongoing

regulation and performance of identity, through a consumption that is as much about acts of divestment as it is about those of possession.

Thus far, both the households and the various disposal acts discussed have been ones where it is possible to talk about the interplay between narratives of the self and the narratives suggested by particular objects. In part this is about the relative stability of these two households and their relational composition; both have been living together for years and both comprise just two adults. But even this stability is illusion, for identity is always relational, not to mention complex in its temporalities and spatialities. Our self narratives are frequently highly provisional negotiations, with sequential and simultaneous significant others. Our narratives of who we are, then, are not just about an I but about a permeable I, who connects to and is shaped by a multifarious 'we', formed of partnerships, families and social relations of nation, community, ethnicity and so on. Moreover, this I-we is a complex historical being as well as a present one. But what happens when we look at less enduring relationships, or at households in which younger children are present? How do the entanglements of love and the saving and wasting of consumer objects play out in these circumstances?

2.2: Making the couple: ejecting and wasting the other

In a society in which divorce and/or the break-up of partnerships is commonplace (Simpson, 1998) it is probably safe to assume that most people reading this paper will have either direct or indirect experience of the effects of break-up on the material culture of the home.[2] In dismantling the home in people, the things that constitute that home are typically disassembled too, divided-up between the former couple. Some are taken with the partner who leaves, if one remains behind, continuing to live in the same house or flat; other things may be abandoned, or even destroyed, in the process of separation. The research disclosed numerous traces of the first of these tendencies, typically in relation to men who had been recently divorced and who had moved out of what they referred to as 'the marital home', taking with them an assortment of furniture and furnishings either discarded or unwanted by their ex-partners. Jim is a prime example of this. Included in Jim's new house in Trent View, along with various 'necessary' new purchases such as appliances and a three piece suite, is what he calls a 'chocolate brown wall unit' left over from his 'bachelor days' and a pine bed which he 'made years ago', both of which had been kept in marginal spaces of the 'marital home'. The wall unit, however, now resides in his new living room. Also here is his hi fi system. What we see here is the ways in which the trajectory of certain things out of the formerly shared home connects to the un-making of the couple. Indeed, we see here how, in break-up, things that had been shared recover previous possession histories, mutating to singular, and sometimes contested, ownership/possession. Moreover, we also catch the first glimpses of how critical it is for many women in this position to get rid of the things that signify to them the former couple. In order to explore this further, we draw on two further instances from the research.

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[2] It should be noted here that the extensive research literature on the family and the more limited work on divorce are exclusively people-centred (see, for example: Finch, 1989; Finch and Mason, 1990; Simpson, 1998). Even in Simpson's ethnographic exploration of the disentanglements of divorce, it is networks, disputes and narratives that are emphasised, as well as money and effects on children. Whilst objects make a fleeting appearance here, in the form of gifts and property, the potency of the material culture of the home in enacting separation is largely over-looked.

Claire and Trevor are both in their forties and had recently got married when we began the research with them. The couple live in what was formerly Trevor's house, in the Trent View area, occasionally with Katie, Claire's teenage daughter from a previous relationship, who had recently inherited a flat in London, consequent upon her father's death. Claire had recently completed a degree as a mature student, and currently works in sales, whilst Trevor works as a finance manager. The recurrent thread of the year spent with this household was of clearing out previous homes and lives in things, both Trevor's and the home of Katie's father. It is Claire who was the main agent in these coincident and emotionally connected acts. Indeed, whilst Claire's ruthless week-long clearance of the London flat was to make a home for Katie, it was about emotional closure for Claire too, her simultaneous acts of clearance from Trevor's house working to make this her home and significant partnership.

Claire's purging of the contents of Trevor's house in the course of their year of research participation was little short of exhaustive. On first meeting her, she narrated how, on moving in and 'having got the licence', she declared the need for things to go: 'poor Trevor, he thinks his life has been turned upside down'. Initially Claire's attentions focused on the kitchen, which was ripped out and replaced. In our first meeting she described how the units, lighting, flooring and all the appliances had been jettisoned on the grounds that they were 'old fashioned' and/or 'unsafe' (the cooker), 'old' (the fridge freezer) or 'disgusting', and how they had been replaced with a flat pack kitchen, bought via a leaflet offer that came through the door, and appliances, from Argos. The effect is described as 'not quite my ideal' but as better than before, and Claire's attentions turned to other areas of the house, including the living room, bathroom and back space storage zones. Not only did Claire confess to wanting to get rid of all the living room furniture but she also wished to see Trevor's Cobra sports car removed from the garage and to eliminate the contents of the loft. Over the course of the year spent with this household, the contents of the loft were taken to charity shops, binned or sold via car boot sales; the bathroom was made over, involving the binning of an 'old and tatty carpet' in favour of 'a nice pine floor', and the replacement of bathroom accessories; various duplicates in things consequent upon the amalgamation of two households were either binned, passed on or taken to the tip; and Claire also went through Trevor's wardrobe, removing all she regarded as no longer suitable or appropriate. She also managed to relocate one piece of living room furniture, get Trevor to buy a new sofa and, by the time of our final visit, the Cobra, described by Trevor as 'his baby', had gone, replaced in the garage by a set of gym equipment, for Claire.

In contrast to Claire and Trevor, Catherine and Stuart have been married for well over ten years, but the traces of the purging consequent upon Catherine moving in to Stuart's house (also in the Trent View neighbourhood) nonetheless are still present in her talk. Like Claire, Catherine moved in with children from a previous relationship, and again like Claire, when she moved in 'several of the things moved out', including a three piece suite. Over the years the entire house has been modified and extended to accommodate Catherine and the family, which now includes a teenage daughter of Catherine and Stuart's, and Catherine says that she has finally managed to get rid of almost everything that was there when they arrived. Indeed, the only set of things to have survived the ensuing years is the dining room suite. A wedding present from Stuart's father to Stuart and his first wife, these things continue to trouble Catherine. Indeed, she would desperately like them to go, but what gets in the way of this is their

quality, their durability and the cost of replacing a table and eight matching chairs, 'a dear do' and an expenditure that Catherine cannot justify since there is no trace of physical decline in these things. Indicative of the degree to which people find it difficult to get rid of things that are intensely durable, it is instructive that Catherine still desires the removal of this dining room suite. That she does so, we maintain, is precisely because of what these pieces of furniture signify, the wedding gift to Stuart and his first wife, whose presence consequently remains in 'their' things in her house.

Claire and Trevor and Catherine and Stuart exemplify the high levels of re-partnering in the UK that coincide with high levels of divorce and separation. What is particularly striking about their stories however, is how re-partnering connects to the ridding and wasting of things. Indeed, it is instructive to compare Claire's systematic and on-going purging of the things in Trevor's house over the year with Catherine's telling off-hand remark that 'after all these years' she had 'finally managed to (almost) get rid of everything'. What is going on here, transparently, is the ejection and indeed wasting of the things that constituted the previous home, and – by implication – an attempt to erase the trace in things of the previous (female) partner and of a previous relationship. For these women these things stand for and in a sense become these figures and these relationships; they work to make these ghostly figures and relationships present in their homes, demanding therefore that they be made absent, even destroyed in being made absent. At the same time, releasing these things is seen to be not just expressive of, but constitutive of love relations; a sign of commitment, love and devotion on the part of the male partner. Trevor's compliance in these acts is total, Stuart's almost so: verging on the sacrificial, it works to constitute their current partners as the objects of devotion and simultaneously makes the emotional space for these women to narrate the identity of the couple through the acquisition of the new and the building of a new home in things. Moreover, that Trevor and Stuart make this sacrifice is not unconnected with the making of the new couple in houses with histories of previous cohabitation for both men. Albeit that this may make economic sense in particular instances, the evidence from this research is that sacrifice (and its attendant purging and wasting) is the consequence.

Rather different is the case of Emma and Richard. Mid-way through the research, Emma, who is mid 30s and who works as a local government officer, bought a new house on the edge of the Player Fields area. She had previously been living in temporary rented accommodation following splitting up with her former long term partner, and moved in to this house with her new partner, Richard. In a way that contrasts markedly with the previous two households, the moving of both partners contains none of the purging of either Catherine or Claire. Instead, having been through the process of abandoning things previously, Emma and Richard buy new things for their new home, in the style of a couple 'starting out', but rationalise between them the things of which they have two. This is achieved most easily in relation to the functional, saucepans and other forms of kitchen equipment, but is hardest to do in relation to music and books. As Emma says, 'that felt very risky. We did hum and hah about that because there could be that horrible day when you're splitting up again'. At the same time, however, it is highly significant that Richard insists on the removal of the last remaining vestiges of Emma's previous partner from their new house. Finding a box of kitchen equipment belonging to Emma's previous partner in the cupboard under the stairs, he uses the need to store some garden furniture – a present to the couple from his great aunt – to insist on the ejection of

these things from their home. Here we see how the need to eject the former partner can extend to men as well as women; further evidence for how critical it is that the forging of the new couple in things excludes all trace of previous relationship histories; and how things invested with the current couple have the power to effect the ejection of those that signify past histories.

In this case, neither Emma nor Richard is moving into a home with a history for either of them. Rather this home is the proverbial blank sheet. Yet, even here, we find the same emphasis on the importance of ridding and wasting to the formation of the couple identity. Nowhere is this clearer than in the ridding of the duplicate things that each brings with them to the new household. Once again, we see how ridding the material culture of the home is critical to acts of love and devotion, and how to divest ones self of things in couple formation is read by the significant other both as expressive of and constitutive of love, and as emblematic of commitment. With separation, divorce and re-partnering at historically high levels in the UK, what looks like a throwaway society is, on this evidence, more the effect of a society making love relations through what is done with and to things, and doing this by discarding things on what has been to hitherto, an unprecedented scale.

A rather different take on the same sacrificial theme is disclosed by the mother-child relation, to which we turn now.

2.3: Modernising mum
We begin this section with three stories, that of Jen and her two children and those of two British-Asian women, Thuraya and her sons and Aneesa and her daughters.

Jen is in her forties, works in IT and is a single parent living with her two children, Poppy (17) and Niall (12). The family have lived for approximately ten years in a rented house in Player Fields. Like several similarly aged women participating in the research, Jen describes herself as a keeper and hoarder; she appreciates and accumulates assemblages of 'nature', stones, chestnuts, twigs and pine cones, and much of her furniture, at least when we first met her, was second-hand, sourced from junk shops and rescued from skips. Mid-way through the research a transformation occurred in Jen's living room. The room was redecorated at the insistence of Niall and Poppy, who – according to Jen – declared that they 'wanted the room to be different – they wanted it not full of my old rubbish'. As part of this redecoration, Jen dispensed with the sofa, buying a new bright red one from a long established family-run department store. She also threw out a number of her nature collections, via the bin. To do this caused her considerable grief. Worrying about 'not filling up the planet with my rubbish' and agonising about whether she should have buried these things in the garden, to 'recycle them' and 'return them to the earth', she nonetheless placed these things in the bin. At a slightly later juncture, a large 'silver' widescreen TV appeared in the living room. Bought to coincide with the screening of Euro 2004, this was another child-centred purchase which Jen legitimated by Niall's interests in football. However, this TV was something that both children clearly desired. Indeed, Poppy says, 'Me and Niall didn't like the old, old TV – it's old and we're young'. The old TV was taken to the tip.

A similar story is disclosed at Aneesa's house, also in Player Fields. Aneesa is early 50s, a widow with five adult children, one of whom had recently married but who was

living with her husband back in Aneesa's house. Aneesa's living room contains an imposing leather three piece suite, a £3000 Mother's Day present from her family. This the family bought to replace previous furniture, which Aneesa describes as having only cost £300. This was taken away by Family First.[3] The bathroom too has similarly been redone, again on the insistence of Aneesa's daughters. On a subsequent visit to Aneesa's she disclosed how an overnight stay in hospital had resulted in one of her daughters clearing out 20 knives, 2 pots and pans, 2 kitchen bins, a mahogany book shelf, 2 vases, some velvet curtains, a saw, a lawn mower, some photograph albums and a doll brought back from Pakistan. Some of these things were dumped at the nearest charity shop; others were stuffed in the household's wheelie bins. Aneesa recites her daughter's purging of her things through the modernising narrative, mimicking her daughters' mantra: 'Mum, this is too old', 'Mum this is old fashioned', 'Mum we're sick of old things'. To which Aneesa's response is the classic elevation of use over age and style: 'No need to buy new things if old ones still working', and the daughters' collective retort, 'Oh mum, live! Get some new ones!' The same story is repeated in Thuraya's house, also in Player Fields. Like Aneesa, Thuraya is a widow. She has four adult children, and again these children have wrought major changes to a home interior that Thuraya found perfectly acceptable. Again, they insisted on the replacement of the three piece suite and the entire redecoration of the living room, using the same justification of age to jettison these things, 'it's too old mum', 'mum, it's not modern', 'mum we've been looking at these cupboards since we were little, we have to redecorate'.

Jen's story is an inversion of existing work in consumption, which emphasises the importance of repetitive acts of child-focused acquisition as expressive of parental love, and particularly of mother love. As Miller (1998) has shown, such shopping acts remain critical to the recursive constitution of the child as the object of devotion, and therefore to mothers' constitution of themselves as subjects of devotion. On this we remain clear. Indeed, we can see this running through Jen's purchase of their new widescreen TV. But, these relations are not just ones enacted through acts of purchase. Rather, they are woven through home possessions; the things that are in our homes, which may have been in them for years, decades even, and which may precede the presence of children within them. Indeed, the stories above disclose how parent-child love relations are frequently worked out through the ejection and wasting of these home possessions. Specifically, we can see here how children constitute both their differentiation from the parent (and particularly mother) through home possessions and explore their power as objects of devotion through working with the presence and absence of particular goods, specifically those incorporated into the consumption practices that matter to them, TV viewing for example, rather than laundering. Indeed, what we see in these instances is how the presence/absence of things can spill over from the confines of children's bedrooms – the normative site of the child in things – extending to encompass the rooms that the normative identifies with the presentation of the adult self in things, the living room in Jen's case and the living room and kitchen in the case of both Thuraya and Aneesa. In complying with her children's desires and getting rid of certain things from 'their' living room, then, Jen is clearly demonstrating the degree of her love for her children, constituting her children as primary objects of devotion, yet simultaneously using the wasting of

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[3] Family First is a charity that donates second hand furniture to households in need and sells other second hand objects as a means of fundraising.

things to constitute her identity as a loving mother. However, it is important not to read such acts just as instances of a pure, sacrificial mother love. Indeed, read carefully, such acts are rather more ambivalent love stories, at one and the same time affirmative of child-parent love and illustrative of its manipulations and ambivalences.

Although very different in their social dynamics, in that they span ethnicities, ages, not to mention life experiences, Jen's, Aneesa's and Thuraya's stories are brought together by a common narrative, "modernising mum". What we see here is children actively seeking to constitute what they see to be appropriate mothers in things, and doing this through related acts of divestment and acquisition. In so doing they consistently attempt to eject and make waste what they see as negative, namely the old, and acquiring in its place the valued new, a manoeuvre which, when it succeeds, simultaneously reworks their mothers as modern whilst satisfying their own valuations in things. Evidently, such acts are acutely bound up in the emotional securities afforded by the modern for children, and its importance for the maintenance of children's peer identities. But what they are also indicative of is love's ambivalence, that is, a desire to locate their mothers within this identity, as belonging to the modern, whilst achieving this for their own ends. In certain respects, then, these children are little different from Skeggs' working class women, for whom the new and the modern is the means to social respectability and the acquisition of social and cultural capital (Skeggs, 1997). But, in desiring this identity for their mothers as a means to achieving this for themselves, these children are clearly engaging in manipulative acts of love. In so doing they work the double sacrifice, constituting themselves as simultaneous subjects and objects of devotion and their mothers as the subject, who realises love only through the loss of valued things. Once more then, divestment as wasting is shown to be an act that is both expressive of and constitutive of love relations, in this case between parent (mother) and child and children and parents.

3: Moving and the excess of living
Whilst wasting is undeniably a matter of love relations, it is at the same time, intimately connected to mobility. Indeed, the strength of the connection between moving home and placing things in conduits that render them waste is something that emerged consistently through our fieldwork (cf. Marcoux, 2001). How and why such connections occur is conveyed by the moving stories of a couple of our study households.

Included amongst our participant households was a student house comprised of six people in their early 20s, five of whom were post graduate students. At the start of the research some of these individuals had lived in this private rented flat for as long as two years, others for a much shorter period. Towards the end of the research period, however, the entire household disbanded, moving on to jobs and other work placements, in Berlin, London and elsewhere in the UK. The moving out process is one in which imagined future lives loomed large, having critical effects on what happened to certain of their things. Indeed, 'moving on' was seen to offer the opportunity for all to shed things from their perceived to be past lives, notably undergraduate course notes, clothes, small pieces of furniture and furnishings. Patrick, for example, who was shortly to leave for a work placement in Berlin, used moving out 'to rationalise', undertaking 'a final purge of all the undergraduate notes I ever

took – 17 A4 lever arch files'. At the same time he also chucked 'an entire bin bag of socks – I found all the pairs I could and then thought sod it'. Yet simultaneously he 'bequeathed' items considered to be of value ('a nice clock', a rug and 'a nice picture') to a friend. Adrian, moving within the city, used moving out as an opportunity to chuck out a suit which he regarded as something he 'never should have kept – too short'. He also binned a 'whole load of clothes I was keeping for fancy dress', deeming these items – placed in the bin – to be things he would no longer have a need for. And Patrick, shortly to move to London, used moving out to divest himself of things he had bought to furnish his student room in the flat, specifically a cabinet bought from Homebase.[4] Described as 'cheap' and clearly seen to be inappropriate aesthetically for his new flat in London, to which he does not wish to take 'crappy furniture', this piece was placed in the garden, intended to be broken up to go in the wheelie bin. Along with these individual acts, Patrick, Harvey and Adrian undertook the final acts of flat clearance. Lasting a week, this ended up in two intense days in which 'We got very vicious with the binning. Eventually we had to go to the tip with the stuff, there was just too much rubbish for even three wheelie bins'. The jettisoned included: 'the remains of freezer contents; unrecognisable remains of food, bags of ice with bits of meat in them somewhere; horrible clothes and unclaimed objêts d'art', along with a few books and a bike frame.

This student house is a classic example of contemporary urban living for many young people in the UK. Indeed, the disbanding and clearance of multi-occupancy households is repeated on an annual basis across most university towns and cities, with comparable effects on the trajectories of things, as the unwanted and no longer required are left behind and abandoned, at the tip as here or, as elsewhere, on the street and in front yards and gardens. Such acts appear to be emblematic of a throwaway society, but as the testimony of this student house suggests, what is actually going on here is more complex.

There are three points that we want to highlight here. First, this is a moving story that is clearly about the connections between divestment and moving-on. Here, moving on in life is materialised through the divestment of things; much as in Section 2.2, divestment and discarding, as well as literally moving house, work to make the space for the narration of a new life, which requires materialising in the passage of things. Secondly, discarding is constituted through a strong sense of the normative. Although things are clearly being jettisoned by the student house, and in ways that connect these things to the waste stream, they are still being placed somewhere, and a somewhere regarded as appropriate; they are not being dumped just anywhere. Moreover, these particular acts of repetitive placement are clearly perceived to be hard and even anxiety-laden work; they are not, as the throwaway society thesis suggests, carefree acts. Thirdly, these acts betray in their singularity and repetitiveness a lack, of knowledge about and capacities to do other with these surplus objects. Seemingly, if they cannot be passed on to a known someone else, or absorbed by the wheelie bin, the tip is the only site which this household can imagine as an appropriate location for discarding and abandoning the household's surplus. Nevertheless, whilst the student house might look the quintessential exemplar of the throwaway society, actually these acts of throwing away connect up to particular social processes. Specifically, they say more about the nature of contemporary inner-

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[4] Homebase is a mid-price mass market UK DIY/ home store.

urban living in the UK, its mobility and the transience in associated dwelling, and they highlight the implications of these trends for levels of discarding consumer goods. What, however, of the moving stories of more established family households?

Mid-way through the research period Jane and Jonathan took a spur-of-the-moment, potentially life-changing, decision to move from their house on the edge of the Raleigh Heights area to France, where Jonathan had successfully applied for a vacancy in an English-speaking school. The post came with a four bedroom apartment, with one living room and kitchen. At this point, Jane and Jonathan had been living in the same three bedroom Victorian semi for eight years. They had four children of ten and under, with another who arrived shortly before the final interview and the move. Jonathan worked as an IT teacher whilst Jane home-educated their children. The children all play musical instruments, and at the time all had their own plant and small animal breeding mini-businesses (guinea pigs, hamsters and fish), located primarily in the couple's large garden. Much of household provisioning here occurred through second-hand outlets: the tip, charity shops and breakers' yards, along with neighbours and the home-education social network were the routine, long-standing sources of acquisition for most consumer goods, with the exceptions being the supermarket and international satellite TV, which figured as this household's primary points of engagement with mainstream consumer culture.

Jane and Jonathan's moving story began with our third visit to the household. Already, the impending move had precipitated much sorting of things. Things deemed to be of value (30 boxes of books, including first edition science fiction; a book case; a few pieces of furniture with 'a pretension to heirloom value', together with some pieces of German china gifted through the family 'that would be too problematic to get rid of') had been taken to Jane's mother's house. At the same time, Jane and Jonathan had begun to use their vast knowledge of the second-hand market to sell off their surplus things, a strategy designed to realise as much money as possible, as a financial cushion for the move. The couple had held a yard sale of their home-education materials. Various pieces of furniture had been advertised in the free paper: bunk beds, children's wardrobes, a sofa bed, a G Plan sideboard, book shelves, and a fridge freezer. Approximately forty items of computer-related equipment had been placed in lots on eBay, along with a Marillion picture disk 'transcription'. The car had been sold via the paper, along with the piano, bought by someone who had come to see the bookshelves. Meanwhile, Jane had managed to pass on the animals and fish to other mothers, along with the plants, a bathroom chair and a home-composter. They were planning to sell the left-over surplus at a car boot sale the following Sunday.

By visit four, a week or so prior to the move, all talk of optimism and money-making had vanished; the couple's capacity to use their knowledge of the second-hand economy to realise money seriously dented by the realisation that much of what they were trying to sell was of little value, if not valueless. The furniture is the most telling category of such things. Having failed to sell these things through the paper, Jane resorted to what she had previously described as 'easy recycling' – in this case the use of charity shops – in an attempt to get these things carried away. After several abortive attempts she had finally found one charity shop that would take some of these things, the children's wardrobes. The continued presence of the surplus also sits uneasily with their realisation that very soon all their effects would have to fit in a Land Rover, some travel trunks and a trailer. Already, much of the space is allocated,

to the things which household members are reluctant to give up, three oriental rugs, a Kenwood Chef and Magimix food processor, a few soft toys, some of the musical instruments and the family's bicycles. By moving day itself the surplus had gone, but it is only by jettisoning it at the tip that Jane and Jonathan and their children were able to leave their former home behind and embark on their new lives.

Socially, the contrast between the student house and Jane and Jonathan's household could not be stronger. With five children, having lived in the same house for eight years, strongly pro recycling, green living and re-use and anti-consumerist in their rhetoric and practice, Jane and Jonathan are at the other end of the spectrum to the student house in terms of their investment in contemporary consumer culture. Yet, as their moving story demonstrates, the process of moving brings them infinitely closer. As the date for the move gets nearer so, as with the student house, this household's things mutate, to surplus and then to excess, and the conduits they use for getting rid of their things contract, eventually to those that connect to the waste stream. In the final throes of moving then, they resort to exactly the same acts of guilt-ridden and anxiety-laden throwing and chucking as student house.

Taken together, the student house and Jane and Jonathan's moving stories highlight that moving works not just to focus attention on the value of the things that we have in our homes but to constitute a household surplus in things. Moving, then, is intrinsically connected with divestment; it requires decisions to be made over what to keep and what to discard. Moreover, the temporalities of moving work to constitute the surplus as an excess that can no longer be carried forward. As moving dates loom nearer, the surplus in things become more pressing, its release enabled only through conduits that can absorb the surplus easily but which have the effect of moving these things toward the waste stream, in so doing casting the surplus as excess. In such circumstances, in a culture that requires we take things with us when we move or relocate them elsewhere, rather than to leave them behind in the home (Buchli and Lucas, 2000), to discard and throw away by turning things to waste becomes a means to enable geographical mobility.

4: Conclusions
In the two previous sections we have demonstrated the paucity of the thesis of the throwaway society. In this thesis the undeniable matter of waste, itself pressing, urgent and excessive, is used to infer the presence of a society defined by its generation; a society ceaselessly discarding and abandoning its surplus as excess, as part of an endless desire for the new. Morally corrupt and unequivocally environmentally damaging, the rhetoric of the throwaway society classifies discarding as intrinsically bad and commands us to assume control of our wasting, suggesting the adoption of heightened regulatory practices around disposal as the means to ensure that we clean-up our act. The thesis, however, lacks depth and provenance. It is, actually, glib. Indeed, to infer the presence of a throwaway society from contemporary levels of waste generation is problematic for at least four reasons.

Firstly, such arguments neglect the historical and archaeological record. As a depth of archaeological work shows, all societies both throw things away and abandon them, and the discipline of archaeology is in part built on the excavated rubbish dumps of past settlement (Buchli and Lucas, 2001; Lucas, 2002; Rathje and Murphy, 2001). What *is* different about some, but not all, contemporary societies is the amount and

volume of what is currently thrown away (Chappells and Shove, 1999). However, a quantitative difference is not necessarily conceptually important. Indeed, when conjoined with contemporary tendencies in both curation and collecting (Belk, 1995; Macdonald, 2002; Pearce, 1995, 1998), we can see that the alleged throwaway society is one that simultaneously places a premium on the increasing preservation and conservation of things (Lowenthal, 1990; Macdonald and Ffye, 1996; Samuel, 1994; Urry, 2002; Wright, 1985). At the same time as more and more things are being thrown away then, more and more is being kept, with predictable effects on the accommodation and storage of things (Cwerner and Metcalfe, 2003). So, a second difficulty with the throwaway society thesis is that it elevates the contemporary significance of discarding over keeping and preserving. The third and fourth difficulties occur in relation to assumptions made about the connections between the throwaway society and tendencies in consumption. In focusing on acts of throwing away, the notion of the throwaway society draws attention, correctly in our view, to the importance of discarding and disposing of things. For too long, studies of consumption have afforded primacy to acts of acquisition and memorialising (Miller, 1998; Miller et. al. 1998; Mara, 1998; Layne, 1999; Kwint et. al. 1999; Hallam and Hockey, 2001), to the neglect of how we live with ordinary, everyday things (Attfield, 2000; Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2003) or abandon them (Young, 2001). But to go further and to equate discarding things with waste generation is both to assume, thirdly, that that which is discarded automatically becomes waste, and fourthly, to neglect that acts of discarding are not just physical acts involving material things, but culturally and socially productive too (Douglas, 1966; Hetherington, 2004; Hertz, 1960; Munro, 1995).

As this paper has demonstrated, all four of these difficulties manifest themselves when discarding is subjected to close scrutiny. Adopting a material culture approach, and focusing on the process of discarding rather than the act, we have shown that discarding consumer goods is a long way from a matter of automatic waste generation; that such acts frequently involve saving as well as wasting things; and, critically, that the process of discarding is one of the key ways in which we make present and materialise some of our primary social identities and the love relations that sustain them. Moreover, and as both Sections 2 and 3 have shown, issues of care, concern, guilt and anxiety are rarely absent from the process of discarding. More pragmatically, and as a corollary, we maintain that to understand contemporary levels of waste generation in the UK requires not just that we hone in on the trajectories and destination points of discarded objects (Bulkeley et al. 2005) but focus as well on the processes that constitute the social death of things. Current trends in couple formation, separation and dissolution, as well as increased geographical mobility and allied trends in household formation and house purchase are all critical here. They suggest that what looks like a throwaway society is actually no more than a manifestation of key social trends. But equally, and as we have shown, this is a society in which the discarding of consumer goods works as sacrifice (Bataille, 1989). That so many consumer goods appear to be literally thrown away in contemporary UK society, then, is perhaps no more than a manifestation of the continued importance of love's desire, and specifically its realisation, manifestation *and* extinction through the world of goods.

(10880 words).

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