

RESEARCH

Reminiscence and Recompense: Reuse and the Garage Sale

Gretchen M. Herrmann

Among the mix of motivations that inspire people to sell and shop at garage sales is the desire to prevent the disposal of still usable goods. Sales can be so effective for redistributing consumer goods and reducing waste that numerous municipalities, such as Sunnyvale, California and Sydney, Australia, promote their sales through a community-wide staging. Lengthy corridor sales in the U.S., like that held annually on Route 127 (the “World’s Longest Yard Sale”), serve the same function, drawing positive media attention and promoting civic pride. But unlike the mundane act of recycling used papers and cans at the curb, making goods available for reuse at garage sales is an action loaded with personal sentiment. Second-hand purchases are often imbued with “sticky” emotional orientations (Ahmed 2010) and reminiscences. This article therefore examines the garage sale as a site for redistributing goods with emotions and histories attached. Participants derive some small recompense in the form of money made, the acquisition of inexpensive goods, and the self-satisfaction associated with reducing waste, but shoppers and sellers are also allied in a tug of war against the landfill to claim the future of goods, especially the storied items adopted by shoppers. Beneath their goal of cleaning out the garage, garnering some extra cash, or obtaining a bargain, participants assert that the reuse of and care for still serviceable goods is meritorious and morally praiseworthy. In the process of reuse, they enhance their moral selves and perform a good deed, however minor, by preserving both the stories of these objects and the embattled earth.

Keywords: garage sales; yard sales; reuse; recycling community; affect

Introduction

Garage sales are complex, multifaceted social, economic, and ecological events. People become involved in shopping and selling from the home for a variety of reasons: decluttering, life-cycle changes, moving, downsizing, generating money, a death in the family, a change in taste or status, recreation, socializing, and in an effort to prevent waste. Others find them distasteful or tacky and avoid involvement with sales altogether.

This article examines how garage sales extend the useful life of goods—an important practice to reduce waste headed to already crowded landfills—and at the same time help some participants to construct moral identities. Various cities, both in the United States and Australia where I have focused my research, have adopted community-wide garage sale days as a public policy strategy, designed to encourage more reuse and less landfilling. Large sales expanding along lengthy highways also serve to reduce landfill waste and garner positive media attention. Through their participation in garage sales, shoppers and sellers mutually construct something of a moral ecological identity through reuse activities that save goods from the oblivion of the landfill. But this moral identity associated with waste prevention

is about more than just ecological benefit. The emotional connectedness at sales helps propel items from one owner to another, keeping still useful goods “alive” and circulating. Garage sale trade thus also engages with the histories and reminiscences of the sellers as the goods pass to the shoppers, many of whom like to know the individual backgrounds of the belongings they purchase. Finally, the article looks at the complex and conflicting meanings of waste in the garage sale context, from the rejection of goods on offer by the owner to the new life afforded them by the purchaser.

Background: US Garage Sales and Emerging Public Policy

In part the consequence of the surplus of consumer goods generated after World War II, garage sales have been widespread in the last 50 years in the United States and Canada. The last decade has also witnessed an increasing number of Australians engaging in sales (Garage Sale Trail 2017). Most of Europe and the developed world utilize publicly located flea markets or “car boot” (trunk) sales to sell excess personal belongings, rather than selling them from home. However, according to Octave Debary (2015), in the last 30 years “yard sales,” called *vide-graniers* or “attic clearances,” have been held in France at the homes of deceased members of a village after their heirs have already selected the items they want. These sales, similar to garage sales, attract collectors and the curious on Sunday outings.

A garage sale is defined here as the temporary public sale of predominantly used goods, primarily household items and clothing, from in and around a private residence (Figures 1, 2 and 3). Sales are conducted and attended by a cross section of the populace, although in the US middle- and stable working-class participants predominate. Most participants do not derive major financial benefit from garage sales, but dealers and those in financial need may be especially profit oriented. Public and private are

brought together in an unusual synthesis at the garage sale (Herrmann 1990; Crawford 2014), and women, the primary garage sale participants, combine their traditional domestic concerns with those of public commerce to play a key role in creating the mixed and multilayered nature of garage sale exchange (Herrmann 1996). The garage sale ethos includes a generalized friendliness and overall egalitarianism, bringing shoppers and sellers from diverse backgrounds into informal contact. Sales transpire in



Figure 1: Garage Sale in Southern California. Photo: Gretchen M. Herrmann. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.



Figure 2: Garage Sale in Ithaca, NY. Photo: Gretchen M. Herrmann. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.



Figure 3: Garage Sale in Ithaca, NY. Photo: Gretchen M. Herrmann. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.

and around the home, such that public commerce and proprietary hospitality become juxtaposed. This juxtaposition prompts a creative blending of the highly impersonal and commercial with the more intimate and gift-like, especially since proprietors are selling (more or less) their own goods. Shifting styles and competing understandings of social relations are found in this exchange (Herrmann 1996, 1997) due to the juxtaposed hospitality (gift) and commercial (commodity) modes of exchange.

City-Wide Sales & Reuse as Local Waste Policy

The reuse potential of goods at garage sales has long attracted communities interested in reducing the solid waste that enters the landfill. Given the size of the garage sale phenomenon,¹ this informal second-hand exchange can be seen as a significant means of redistributing still-serviceable used goods.² Communities in California, often at the forefront of ecological practices, recognized the utility of holding municipal garage sale days. As a reporter for the *San Jose Mercury News* put it, “The mainstreaming of garage sales has now reached municipal levels, for environmental reasons. Cities have caught on that organizing a citywide sale reduces landfill loading” (Wykes 2005: 1). Sunnyvale, CA was a pioneer in sponsoring a garage sale day each year in order to reduce the city’s solid waste stream. A 2012 posting by the city encouraged citizens to participate in and even register for shopping and selling on their municipal garage sale day: “Shoppers come from all around the Bay area to shop Sunnyvale’s garage sales, keeping tons of useful items in circulation for reuse and out of the landfill” (Sunnyvale, CA 2012).

The city of Cupertino does something similar with an annual “Citywide Garage Sale,” and if items do not sell, they recommend other reuse pathways such as donations to charity or Freecycle. Cupertino even provides a map and a short promotional video. Palo Alto, Mountain View

and Vallejo, CA, along with Walnut, IL and numerous other municipalities also sponsor a garage sale/recycle day. The City of Palo Alto has this to say about the benefits of a municipal garage sale: “Reusing—whether you donate, buy, or sell—is one of the best ways to reduce waste, keep usable stuff out of the landfill, conserve our natural resources and reduce our carbon footprint” (Palo Alto, CA 2018).

El Cerrito, CA has held a city-wide event annually since 1990 when a local recycling advocate persuaded the town officials it would be a good way to promote reuse and to clear out and inspect garages after an earthquake. Their annual promotion notes that after a date is selected:

The City then advertises and promotes the event, attracting shoppers from all over the East Bay. The event not only promotes reuse, it also gives residents a chance to get rid of clutter; it is a fun community event and a chance to get to know neighbors. (El Cerrito, CA 2018)

Although later to the practice, Australia has enthusiastically embraced garage sales as a means of reducing landfill use and promoting community ties with their annual Garage Sale Trail (GST) weekend. Begun as a non-profit in 2010, the GST aims to “to promote reuse, reduce waste to landfill, create awareness of illegal dumping, unite communities, and stimulate local economies” (Meander 2015). In 2014 they had more than 8,000 registered sales, with over 300,000 participants listing almost three million items for reuse, with over AU\$3 million generated nationally. The GST strongly emphasizes the quantity of potential waste kept from landfill, situating amounts in terms of tons of goods, volumes of shipping containers, and numbers of items kept from landfill, for example, “648,000 items found a new home and were saved from landfill” (Garage Sale Trail 2017). They also emphasize the

importance of educating people in reusing goods, often in creative ways.

The GST has rapidly spread to many areas of Australia. As discussed at length elsewhere (Herrmann 2006; 1996), sales can be a fruitful venue for generating community interaction and neighborhood ties, and the GST embraces this potential, pointing to over 90,000 community connections made nationally in 2014, or an average of 44 interpersonal connections made during the GST in 2016 (Garage Sale Trail 2017). They also sport a fetching sign with an arrow demarcating the “Garage Sale Trail,” with “Choose to Reuse” as their slogan. The GST has already sparked academic interest in the event, which has focused on the mobility of the goods for sale and the creativity of participants in manipulating ideas about waste and value (Chahine 2016).

Corridor Sales

We cannot neglect the keep-it-out-of-the-landfill contribution of the numerous American “Route” or “Corridor” sales. While their purpose is not explicitly to reduce landfill use as in the Australian GST and most city-wide sales, the various “corridor sales” do serve to keep much waste out of the landfill. Perhaps the best known of the corridor sales is the “World’s Longest Yard Sale” (WLYS), which began in 1987. Arrayed along 690 miles on Route 127, the WLYS is comprised of various dealers and locals looking to buy and sell large quantities of goods, many of which will dodge the destiny of the landfill. In his depiction of the WLYS, Lucas Reilly (2018) probes the American obsession with size as a pertinent cultural value influencing the popularity of the WLYS. Despite the claim to the title of the “longest yard sale,” the WLYS is actually shorter than the Historic National Road 40 sale by more than 100 miles! Another eventual challenger for longest sale is US Route 50’s “Great US Yard Sale.” Begun in 2000, the US Route 50 sale is attempting to grow coast-to-coast from its birthplace in Indiana. A promotional description notes:

The Great U.S. Yard Sale also serves to promote tourism along U.S. 50, to unite the many diverse communities, to provide opportunities for fund raising by civic organizations, to aid the environment through recycling, and to serve as an opportunity for individuals to enjoy a great weekend of sales. (Berg 2017)

Other areas of the country also hold corridor sales, such as Missouri’s Highway 61 garage sale, Highway 80 between Georgia and Texas, and the Kentucky Scenic Byway 400-mile sale. Smaller local corridor sales abound, including my local 50-mile Route 90 sale, which is frequented by area shoppers. These corridor events emphasize recreation, tourism, civic boosterism, and size more than recycling, although the reuse function is often publicized and appreciated. They also tend to use the term “yard sale” instead of “garage sale.” While most people use the terms interchangeably and “garage sale” has a more widespread usage, “yard” is probably more apt for these sales in that they often use vacant lots and other landscape openings

instead of actual garages or other home spaces for their selling activities. Many sellers even set up tents.

Many individual sales in a “city-wide” event are garage sales as previously defined, featuring more or less the sellers’ pre-owned goods at their own property, although there may be numerous fill-in or add-on sales by people who do not reside along the route. But the corridor sales featured along the various routes in the US, and to some extent in Australia with the GST, are hybrid events, as are some city-wide sales such as that in Warrensburg, NY, which is self-proclaimed as the “World’s Largest Garage Sale,” featuring over 500 vendors. Some of these vendors are likely to be dealers to a greater or lesser extent, who range from selling on just one weekend a year to being full-time traders. Many sellers attend auctions with the express purpose of reselling at the WLYS to supplement their income (Reilly 2018). Such events are really semi-flea markets mixed in with “genuine” garage sales as defined earlier, and the social relations between sellers and buyers tend to be more commercial and the goods changing hands more commodity-like (Herrmann 1997). The fact that the items have not been owned by the seller renders transactions with dealers, however friendly, nonetheless more commercial.

Methodology

Given that garage sales are increasingly seen by policymakers as a means to reduce waste and conserve resources, this paper examines the motivations of buyers and sellers in order to explore the extent to which concerns about waste and the environment factor into participant decision-making. This paper draws on over 30 years of qualitative investigation.³ The research relies upon participant-observation of garage sales, primarily in the areas of Ithaca and Cortland in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, although I have also attended sales in New England, the mid-West and the west of the U.S. and Canada. I have also interviewed more than 320 shoppers and sellers to varying degrees, from 65 lengthy (two-hour) semi-structured interviews to briefer interviews and casual conversations. This number includes the sample of diverse participants of various ages and backgrounds whom I have escorted on their garage sale rounds and observed hosting sales. The longer interviews have been recorded and transcribed. I have almost never had a garage sale participant decline to be interviewed on the topic. In these interviews I utilized both a shoppers’ questionnaire and one on bargaining behavior. I have also tapped into the voluminous articles in magazines and newspapers about garage sales; in this context I refer to journalists as “drive-by ethnographers,” in that they often make good observations and interview worthy informants, but they do not study the subject in depth. Since sales are common events, I have also had many conversations about sale-related topics as an informal part of daily life. I have observed more than 3,000 garage sales and held over a dozen myself. I have utilized articles and postings on the Internet, especially those covering garage sales in distant places such as Australia. I have also analyzed local newspaper advertisements in Ithaca and Cortland from 1950 to 1990 to document the rise in the

number of sales locally. I have also tallied at least 1,200 shoppers and 458 sellers observed at multiple sales by approximate age and sex. The qualitative methods I have utilized over the past 30 years are intended to capture the culture, motivations, and meanings of garage sale exchange. Here I draw upon these insights to illustrate how buyers and sellers draw on and build moral orientations as they save goods from the landfill. This morality is not only related to waste reduction and recompense, but also to reminiscence as they express care for goods with affective value.

On Motivation: Avoiding Landfills Waste Reduction and the Environment

Garage sales became popular in the United States around the same time as the upsurge of ecological awareness in the 1970s. Ecological concern is certainly a major variable in the mix of motivations that lead people to participate in garage sales (see Herrmann and Soiffer 1984). The explosion of consumer goods after World War II quickly provided a surplus stock of goods suitable for garage sales. Furthermore, the early 1970s marked the start of a long-term reduction in spending power for large portions of the U.S. population, prompting many families to take steps to save money. Social attitudes also softened in the 1960s, creating an environment in which it became increasingly acceptable to sell used belongings from the home. Practitioners soon recognized that garage sale involvement could be good for the environment. In her how-to book, *Garage Sale Shopper*, Sunny Wicka, an early garage sale enthusiast from Minnesota, pointed to the reduction of waste as one of the three primary reasons for the growing popularity of garage sales:

We Americans have become acutely aware of our wastefulness, and, casting about for a better scheme of disposal than the junkyard, we have decided to choose instead the process of recycling via The Sale. In this game, everybody wins.⁴ (1973: 7)

In 1977 reporter Jeff Strickler quoted a shopper as saying, "One of the things I like about garage sales is the idea of recycling, ... I mean why throw something away when someone else can put it to use?" (1977: 1C). Further, in an article about garage sale trade in Chicago, IL, Deborah Homsher observed that sales are "an environmentally sound method of recycling objects that might otherwise be discarded" (1977: 1).

Sales afford the opportunity for reuse, and even the repurposing and upcycling, of goods through exchange before their ultimate demise in the landfill. There is always a tension between sales and the existence of the landfill, in that the activities of saving or salvaging goods are in opposition to the oblivion that the landfill represents. Garage sale participants often do not speak at length about the recycling/reuse aspect of garage sale practice. To most, it is sort of a self-evident good or a mitzvah that is performed for an ecologically imperiled earth to keep things that still have use potential, aesthetic interest, or affective value out of the landfill. Actually, reuse via the garage sale is more often related to the method of disposal of excess goods, one that keeps belongings in circulation, than to

the reason(s) why such excess goods were amassed in the first place. When asked about why they are holding a garage sale, sellers usually reply with some of the common motivations such as moving, downsizing, or clearing the garage, in other words, reasons why they have a collection of excess goods that have been rejected from the home. Then when asked specifically about recycling (the overarching term participants use for what is primarily reuse), most readily agree, that yes, of course, recycling is a part of their motivation. Ultimately, with relatively little effort or expense, indeed usually with some small recompense, shoppers and sellers create something of a mutual moral identity (Isenhour 2012: 170) through garage sale engagement. They perform virtuous ecological behavior by saving goods from the landfill and, as consumers, exercising their "individual choice with a sense of responsibility to others" (Barnett et al. 2005: 30) or displaying a moral self.

The attitude of participants with regard to waste reduction has changed little in my years of investigating garage sales. Sellers in my early research noted, for example: "Yes, sales are very much about recycling! Things we hate, others may love. It keeps items in circulation, which is good." Equally, a Cortland man noted, "Yes, it's interesting that so many people are trying to keep things in use. It's a sign of the times, but it's a good sign." Another stated, "Yes, things keep going around. It's a very healthy development." The major difference in participants' responses over the years is that currently they often include the term "sustainable" in their support of recycling. For example this seller enthused, "Trying to be sustainable. That's our goal!", while another said "Recycling is what it's all about. I hope someone can use this stuff." An Ithaca woman presiding over her own and her deceased mother's goods recently noted: "Yes [recycling] is much better than having these things go to the landfill. And people are so creative... the way they repurpose things. It's really fascinating."

When discussing sales, shoppers tend to lead with talk of stellar bargains and money saved, and then often move to the benefits of recycling, especially for those goods with an engaging history or noteworthy story attached. They are frequently enthusiastic about the recycled furnishings, housewares, clothing, and accessories they find at garage sales; some try to purchase as much as possible of their consumer needs at garage sales or other second-hand venues. This orientation to purchase second-hand is allied with opposition to what is viewed as rampant consumerism with its throw-away ethos, as this Ithaca, NY shopper articulates clearly:

Consumers are supposed to buy new stuff. Buying at garage sales, you're not being a consumer. Your self-definition [as a consumer], your sense of self-esteem has something to do with having shiny new things, whether shiny new cars or shiny new toaster ovens. And you're not being that by shopping at garage sales.

Anti-consumerist participants may even go so far as to see utilization of garage sale trade as "beating the system," as does this avid garage sale shopper: "Buying second-hand... shows a little bit of skill in consumerism, in that

buying my clothes second-hand, I've avoided paying the Chairman of the Board at Bloomingdales."

Many garage sale participants, both shoppers and sellers, also recognize that recycling reusable items draws on older American values of material conservation (see Strasser 1999). A Cortland seller observed, "Country people have always known how to keep things in use. They have solid, old-fashioned values." Those who seek out antiques or goods from the past because they are better made appreciate sales for keeping things in circulation and out of landfills. Such pro-conservation views and recycling practices help create moral selves, but also provide the opportunity for some small amount of monetary and psychological recompense.

Garage sale participants frequently engage in other activities that reduce landfill use. Many shoppers try to purchase as much as possible of their consumer needs second-hand. Unsold garage sale goods are usually donated to charities, given away to acquaintances, put to the curb for free, and/or packed up for a future sale. Trash disposal is a last resort. Similarly, garage sale participants are likely to engage in and utilize an interrelated nexus of allied and overlapping ecologically minded second-hand outlets and activities, including thrift stores, rummage sales, clothing exchanges, flea markets, auctions, freecycling, and various kinds of Internet sales, such as Craigslist or eBay. Some even learn to sew and/or repair various types of items, especially under the auspices of the burgeoning "remakery" trend. In this regard, the garage sale is one of an interrelated nexus of sites for the promotion of reused consumer goods that reduce the solid waste stream to the landfill.

Meaning, Affect and Morality

Sellers, indeed, participate in garage sales with a wide range of motivations, from periodic housecleaning, life-cycle transitions, and socializing to generating cash and profit-making. Shoppers' motivations include recreation, recycling, and bargain-hunting (see Herrmann and Soiffer 1984). Given this mix of personal motivations, the salience of environmental concern varies from individual to individual. Unless participants are already ecologically motivated, they may view the environmental benefits as something of a bonus in the array of other good reasons to shop at or hold garage sales. Some do not care at all. But environmental concerns are not the only means through which participants can construct a moral identity. Garage sale practitioners often value the personalized and unique qualities integral to garage sale goods, and, since they see the landfill as the end point of existence for material things, they depict reuse in sales as "*saving* items from the landfill." The modern landfill can be viewed as a maw that devours ever more goods from the world above ground into a miasma of material oblivion that is ecologically and spiritually troubling for both society and the earth. Joshua Reno observes that "landfilling" (Reno 2009) strips once discrete items of their character, form, context, and identity, rendering them indiscrete and indeterminate. The deracination and loss of form and definition of items can be repugnant to garage sale participants. As Octave Debarry put it

in his study of emotional qualities attached to second-hand items in France:

When time-worn objects exchange hands in yard sales the point is not simply to recycle them, or save them from oblivion.... These second-hand markets give objects a reprieve by extending their lifespans, by keeping alive something that buyers see in them: a reserve value, an opportunity to seize passing time; an opportunity to remember. (2015: 139)

As used items mainly from the home, the goods that change hands at a garage sale are often saturated with histories and sentiment. Some have been "singularized" (Kopytoff 1986) or made unique through ownership and are thus imbued with something of the owner. This is similar to what James Carrier (1990), calls "possessions" (or objects that carry the personal identities of their owners and have been rendered unique personal belongings). The personalized aspect of the items on offer at sales is what distinguishes them from virtually every other form of second-hand selling: the fact that a shopper can often directly purchase something pre-owned by the seller or one of the seller's associates with its history intact.⁵ In Sweden written stories and sentiments may be attached to pre-owned objects available for resale, such as blue jeans (Appelgren and Bohlin 2015), or through QR codes (Appelgren and Bohlin 2017). But even the richness of this sort of contact between a previous owner and potential buyer is eclipsed by the garage sale and the face-to-face interaction it affords. This ability to engage the previous owners, or by extension their associates, is unlike other second-hand exchange venues, with the exception of some flea markets, car-boot sales or pop-up sales. Garage sales also provide more of the original context of items, that is, the ambience, landscaping, and condition of the property, when held at a private residence.

As addressed elsewhere (Herrmann 2015), many shoppers, as well as sellers, seek what Sara Ahmed (2010) describes as the "sticky" effect or the adherence of feeling and history that clings to many items as a positive force within garage sales, making the sales fertile sites for the transfer of affect and emotion. Shoppers often want to know the history of an object, or even to know simply that it has *had* a history, like this Ithaca shopper:

You want to know whose [item] it was, and how it came to be that they don't want it anymore or how it came to be in this person's possession and all that stuff. It is really much more attractive than knowing it came from some factory.

Goods from the home may accrue additional meaning and value from their time served at the heart of most Americans' identities—home and family. Thus, sellers are often motivated by finding good new homes for their possessions. They are essentially creating adoption exchanges for their used belongings—identifying kindred spirits with whom to exchange (Herrmann 2013). As one Ithaca seller observed:

I found that I was real happy with certain people who bought certain clothes that I really didn't want to get rid of but they don't fit me and they haven't fit me in years. But it feels good to see them go to a good home.

Stories are passed on with objects, such as this story about two old caned-seat oak chairs that was related by a seller. Years ago he had refinished the chairs for his mother, and he visited them every Thanksgiving as he sat at her dining room table. After his mother passed away, he gave them to his son. However, his son, "being of the IKEA generation," never used them. The chairs were returned to the seller, who was gratified when a woman showed interest in them. They matched one of the chairs at her dining room table, so she snapped them up and the seller was pleased that they "went to a good home," the characteristic phrase for an object happily rehomed. The San Jose reporter quoted earlier observed that in sales:

Things do have a past and... you're probably going to hear about it before the item becomes yours... Many times I have heard the words, "My mother brought this back from.... Will you take good care of it?" or "We had it on our living room wall... for years."

I walk away from those moments knowing I have a permanent responsibility to those previous owners. I am a guardian of one small piece of that family's history. (Wykes 2005: 1)

The affective and emotional elements of garage sale-goods are contagious as they are intersubjectively passed on from one body to another (Ahmed 2010; Richard and Rudnycky 2009), and the sentiments can be intersubjectively transformative. The following quote relates the history, affect, and subsequent bonding that developed through the appreciation and purchase of a special sweater by a young woman:

Once I got a sweater that was this beautiful hand-knit wool sweater for \$1. It was a gorgeous, gorgeous sweater of Huntington wool, a plaid knit sweater. This is a real hard thing to do. It is real complicated and real gorgeous. I have had it for a long time now. I just started talking to this woman and I just liked her so much. She was such a Mom. She knitted this sweater for her daughter and her daughter was like my age and hated it. She just hated this sweater; she never once wore it. That woman probably spent \$30 on yarn and sold it to me for \$1. One dollar! I was trying to communicate to her, "Look, your daughter is a jerk and she should appreciate this whether she likes the color or the style or not because there are all these hours of labor and time and all this attention to detail." And she wouldn't even take it. She left it at her mother's house and she wouldn't even take it home. I remember where this woman's house is. This sweater is starting to fall apart, but it is something like a memorial to her, you know, her moth-

erly love.... Sometimes you just strike a matchup with someone or something.

This emotion-imbued sweater was ultimately cherished by a shopper who was an appreciative substitute for the seller's unappreciative daughter and a buyer who recognized the seller as a loving "mother" whose maternal love had suffused that hand-knit sweater.

The emotional orientation and affect attached to garage sale goods may even help preserve the form and utility of the objects. One garage sale regular observed that whenever people tell a story, the object has more of an essence, has more of a meaning. They are acquiring something that is not just an object. It is an object which is connected to someone else's life. A seller's direct appreciation of a particular shopper's purchase of an item places a felt obligation to care for the item on the purchaser. One seller admonished the buyer of a hook rug to "think of my grandmother" when you use it, despite the shopper having no acquaintance with the seller or her grandmother. Another shopper felt she had to set a boundary for one seller's enthusiasm, noting that she may have to discard the wall art she was buying at some time in the future if she moved. Her adoption of the item could not be unconditional.

Discussion: Defining Rejection and Waste

Most garage sale exchange consists of shoppers and sellers performing commercial interactions that extend the life of still useful items. The success of a specific garage sale interaction is a positive reaffirmation of the value of an item and, in some ways, also a positive reaffirmation of the participants' morality. The goods on offer at sales are at the edge of disposal—as waste—since they have been rejected from the home and may carry the stigma or stickiness of that rejection. If they do not sell at a sale, they may ultimately end up at the dump despite the proprietors' best attempts to place the items in new homes. These items are constantly flirting with becoming waste.

Joshua Reno (2016: 10) speaks of waste as essentially the byproduct of creating and maintaining form. In the context of garage sales the items on offer may be the byproduct of creating an orderly house, eliminating non-essentials upon entry to assisted living, creating space for an expected baby's room, or any of the numerous life-stage changes of family members (see Herrmann 2011). In these contexts, surplus goods, no matter how lovely or useful, may come to be conceptualized as waste, that is, as rejects or discards. But from the perspective of the material goods, the items on offer at sales are not waste, but rather items in need of new homes.

Given that garage sale goods are basically discards from the home, does that mean that garage sales are then trading in waste? If garage sale goods were waste as defined by our popular conception of waste as a jumble of disorder, decay, and indeterminacy, that is, what goes out in the trash, garage sales would not exist. You might as well just insert the letter "b" in the middle of the word garage and end up with "garbage." People simply would not see anything of much value at them. Although those who dislike

sales might agree with this assessment, the fact that numerous sales are held all over the U.S. and elsewhere and are attended by a cross section of the population attests to the contrary.

In contrast to landfilled goods, the goods in garage sales generally retain their form, qualities, serviceability, and functional identities, although they do become decontextualized, something Mary Douglas (1966: 160) sees as a potentially dangerous first step toward the indeterminacy of waste. Garage sale goods are not only decontextualized, they have also for some reason been “rejected,” even if only for want of space. The stigma of this rejection can taint the goods, leading to the perception by many, especially those who choose not to participate in garage sales, that garage sale merchandise is somehow dodgy, tacky, suspect, tasteless, or somehow “off” (Reilly 2018). This is one kind of “sticky” orientation—a negative one—that can at times become attached to garage sale goods. One shopper’s husband accused her of bringing home “the most God-awful things” from garage sales, a prevalent trope that provides fodder for endless (often sexist) jokes. Such dubious artifacts from garage sales brought into the home pose what Mary Douglas would term a “threat to good order” (1966: 160).⁶ The perception of garage sales as “low rent” is partly fostered by issues of taste. Changing fashions, older technologies, outdated design, and just plain lousy taste account for all too many of the undesirable items on offer among the attractive ones at garage sales. The time-worn observation that “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure” renders “treasures” as individually determined. It also underscores the power of participants to endow goods with new meanings, uses, and values.

Shoppers can redeem or revalue the items tainted by rejection. Instead of reacting to the stigma of rejected goods, shoppers tend to experience their possibilities, along with the other affective orientations of the items, whether positive or negative. Placing them in a sale potentially revalues the goods; through garage sales they can “grow” or develop new histories (Ingold and Hallam 2014; Kopytoff 1986) even as the previous affect remains intact. The goods maintain their previous forms or become modified by their new owners, but with the addition of varied life histories to carry along as they change hands. Debary (2015: 133) believes second-hand goods have a special transformative power in that they can tell a “new story” with new meanings added to their histories. Shoppers examine and evaluate the particular qualities of goods to select those with the potential to serve them, a process that may involve considerable creativity. Joshua Reno (2009: 33) speaks of “scavenging” discards as discovering “potentially enriching materials,” as he notes that scavenging waste is fecund with possibility. Successful shoppers recognize and appreciate the potential reuse utility and even economic value of various garage sale goods. These goods may have ended up in a garage sale because they were rejected from the home, but the proprietors think they are still valuable enough to warrant new homes and to facilitate their “adoption.” Sellers devote considerable time and energy to inviting shoppers to purchase worthy goods at a sale. Thus, such goods have been

only partially rejected, unlike those that have been put in the trash headed to the landfill, or otherwise obliterated.⁷

Conclusions

Garage sales are a major venue for promoting the reuse of serviceable used goods, largely from in and around the home, in the circular economy that is resistant to externalizing waste. Because garage sale commerce is so large, numerous communities, both in the U.S. and Australia, organize annual city-wide and corridor garage sale days to reduce the solid waste stream to the landfill. The Australian GST emphasizes the ability of sales to keep volumes of usable goods from the landfill, while the U.S. corridor and city-wide sales foreground the size of their events. These community sales can generate considerable media attention and civic pride. Nonetheless, the distinguishing characteristic of garage sale exchange remains that the exchange of goods is a more or less direct transaction between shopper and owner and the face-to-face endowment of the storied reminiscence and affective orientations that are “stuck” to objects. Sellers invite a reevaluation of items discarded from their homes that are either too good or too affectively charged to simply relegate to the trash bin. Both shoppers and sellers derive modest recompense for their activities; proprietors gain a little extra cash while buyers save money through the bargains they acquire. Both are united in their desire to circumvent the landfill and both also derive recompense via the moral identity they co-create through their garage sale recycling activities. Thus participants reminisce about their used possessions as they recycle them for the modest monetary and moral recompense afforded in garage sale exchange.

Notes

¹ In 1984 Stephen Soiffer and I estimated that between six and nine million sales were held each year with between US\$600 million and US\$1 billion changing hands (see Herrmann and Soiffer 1984). Because there is so much electronic/Internet-based advertising today and there are so many informal sales that advertise only by putting up a sign, it is currently impossible to capture solid numbers with which to make estimates for today. My current estimate is that somewhere in the vicinity of 12–15 million sales are held per year, with over US\$3 billion changing hands.

² It would be interesting to know the amount of goods kept from landfill disposal by garage sales. The Australians do provide some numbers of tons and items kept from the landfill, but they do not indicate how these figures are calculated. Since it is increasingly difficult to estimate the number of sales in the U.S. and it would require representative knowledge and a measure of how much is saved from the trash in some sales, deriving a meaningful estimate of tons of goods kept out of the landfill is daunting. Nevertheless, we can safely assume that “a lot of stuff” is kept from the trash through garage sale trade. If you were to view “before” and “after” images of a successful garage sale, you would notice a significant reduction of goods. I invite someone more conversant with solid waste to attempt such an estimate.

- ³ The SUNY Cortland Institutional Review Board has approved the research under Exempt Protocol #151601.
- ⁴ The other two were the increased cost of retail merchandise and the expanding number of second homes and cottages that needed furnishings.
- ⁵ Not all items will have belonged to the seller, although the majority of such goods in a “real” garage sale have likely belonged to them. Sales may also include items from relatives, friends, or neighbors, i.e. their associates. Nevertheless, items belonging to the seller’s associates are still more personal than packaged, fungible commodities from stores and the seller may have things to say about them, especially in common situations such as the selling off of the effects of a deceased parent. Further, not all goods carry an interesting story or much personal emotion.
- ⁶ Brand new items that are tacky or tasteless could also be considered a threat to good order.
- ⁷ Reno (2009) documents how even items that are in a landfill may be scavenged, removed, and possibly even reused, but garage sale participants have little or no awareness of that. For them, the landfill is considered the end of the line for goods.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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