

The U. S. garage or yard sale often serves as a secular rite of passage for Americans. Given the importance of the amount and types of consumer goods owned by people, the public disposal (or acquisition) of such possessions can signal a major shift in life orientation. Moving to another location, downsizing, selling baby items, or grandmother's effects after her death all constitute publically engaged rituals of transition to another status or identity. After selling possessions to the public, sellers are left with more space, both physical and psychological, and money which can be used to fashion a new life identity by generating the resources to develop emerging "potential selves."

Garage sales, rites of passage, United States

Life in the United States today, as in traditional societies, is punctuated by life passage rituals, such as weddings, graduations, retirements, and funerals, events that demarcate the end of one status and transition us to another. Yet there is little anthropological literature that addresses how Americans negotiate changes in life roles and social statuses through their lifetimes. Not surprisingly, much of the literature on American rites of passage focuses on initiations, such as sport hazing (Johnson 2011) or student teaching as initiation into the teaching professions (Head 1992). There is some treatment of rites of passage associated with the "American way" of birthing (Davis-Floyd 1992), and with home-birthing (Cheyney 2011) as a transgressive rite of passage. In the area of education anthropologists have studied transitions in grade levels/locations, such as the move from grade school to high

school (Merten 2005). Joel Savashinsky (2000) researched retirement in the United States and found that, in leaving the world of work, retirees often found their work recognition “ceremonies” vapid, formulaic and unsatisfying. In contrast, “informal rites” that were personalized were better as rites of passage to retirement. Luborsky (1994) found that new retirees would redefine themselves and their roles after going through a transition, often involving working with the earth, that allowed them to reconfigure cultural meanings to establish their new identities.

Given the extent to which people create their identities and mark their social status through consumer goods in modernity (Belk 1988; Lunt and Livingstone 1992) and through narratives involving loved objects (Ahuvia 2005), life transitions in the United States are often marked by changes in the amount and type of possessions (Noble and Walker 1997). With the notable exception of anthropologist Jean-Sabastien Marcoux (2001), who analyzes how older denizens of Montreal strategically donate their possessions to achieve “ancestral” status when moving into limited quarters as they age, it is market researchers who have investigated the changes in types and amounts of goods Americans possess during their life course (e.g., Gentry et al 1995). This article examines the life passages, however small, that occur in the quotidian life of Americans as seen through the US garage sale. It provides a unique glimpse into the minor, but often transformative, life changes that punctuate our daily existence and mark changes in self-identity.

The U.S. garage sale is an arena in which personal status and identity are at play, and where participants may be transformed through the exchange of used goods. The transitions are most apparent for sellers, when they are disposing of certain types of goods, and many sales have a transformational subtext: declarations that there will be no more children (when selling remaining baby items), celebration of two families blending (when winnowing possessions down to one household), ridding oneself of a marriage gone sour (when selling a soon to be ex-wife's effects) or a declaration of aging when downsizing one's earthly goods. Even moves – a major reason for holding a sale – are rites of passage, demarcating the location change, whether down the block or across the country, of the sellers' primary living space. Changes in personal activities and/or styles may also trigger a sale. Whether selling all one's silver jewelry upon feeling more like a "gold" person or ridding oneself of horse related things after selling the expensive pet, garage sales mark life transitions. These sales can be dramatic and many function as secular rites of passage. A seller disposes of outworn but usable goods tied to an outworn status/identity, which are, in turn, picked up and assumed by a shopper, who is fashioning a new status/identity. Personal transformations are also found among shoppers, although they are more diffuse, protracted and subtle, unfolding over an indeterminate period of time.

A garage sale is defined here as the temporary public sale of used goods, primarily household items and clothing, from in and around a private residence. Such sales can be found in virtually all American communities, conducted and attended by a cross section of the populace, although middle- and stable working-class participants predominate. The garage sale ethos includes a generalized friendliness and egalitarianism, bringing shoppers and sellers from diverse backgrounds into informal contact. The facts that sales transpire in and around the home, i.e., that public commerce and proprietary hospitality are juxtaposed, and that proprietors are selling (more or less) their own goods are very important in establishing the breadth of social relations found in this exchange (Herrmann 1996b, 1997), ranging from the highly impersonal and commercial to the more personal and gift-like. Sellers participate with a wide range of styles and motivations, from periodic housecleaning and socializing to generating cash and profit-making, as do shoppers, whose motivations include recreation, recycling, and bargain-hunting (see Herrmann and Soiffer 1984). Most participants do not derive major financial benefits 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 in the garage sale (Herrmann 1990; Crawford 1999), 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 1996b).<sup>i</sup>

## GARAGE SALES AS RITUAL

Van Gennep 1960) outlined three stages in his classic treatment of rites of passage. First, there is the separation phase, during which, in the case of the garage sale, sellers are removed from their daily life and work and move into the realm of discretionary, non-work, time. Both the proprietors and the goods are removed physically from their daily contexts and meanings. Sellers are stripped of some of their possessions, which are then jumbled together somewhere outside or peripheral to the main living space such as lawns, garages or porches. The garage sale itself occupies the liminal (or limnoid, as secular ritual) phase of a rite of passage. Here the sellers and goods are liberated from normative constraints (Turner 1974) in the betwixt and between arena of the garage sale practice. Social relations reflect the liminal nature of *communitas* and there is an ethos of friendliness and community (Herrmann 1996b, 2006). Finally, the seller is reintegrated into the social world of daily life in a new status/identity, in part achieved through dispersing possessions during the garage sale. In lieu of possessions, sellers attain more space and money, both of which can be used for developing future statuses/identities and endeavors.

Garage sale practice is markedly liminal (Herrmann 1990, 1996a). Here the focus here on individual life trajectories, and the personal transformation that occurs through garage sales. Case examples<sup>ii</sup> illustrate how garage sales help transition people from one status/identity to another, with their attendant values, behaviors, and possessions.

### CHILD GROWTH AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

Probably the single greatest spur for holding garage sales is the growth and development of children. Whether a new baby is added to the family or the youngest has long outgrown toys and clothing, children's items are a staple of garage sale trade. Each sale held by a developing family represents a unique "rite of passage" for that particular family configuration at that particular time, and many incorporate playful engagements with the public regarding their children's lives. Yet there is something nostalgic as sellers publically acknowledge through a sale that their children will never be as young as they once were, or never again will wear a special dress or favorite sweatshirt. This is especially so when there will be no more children.

Cathy Vanderbuilt was 31 when she held her "I'm not having any more children" sale, reflecting a decision she had long deliberated. Prompted by the fact that she had some older appliances to get rid of and that her parents (themselves

avid garage sale shoppers) were coming to visit, Cathy decided to hold a sale to dispose of baby things she would no longer need. With two girls (eight and seven) and a boy of almost three, she would no longer need the crib, bassinet and other baby items. It was also time to get rid of some of the special dresses the girls had worn when they were little, and also the baby toys. As they prepared for the sale, clothes, furniture and other items were piled high in the recreation room, where Cathy and her parents sorted through the goods and organized and priced the items for the sale. The girls' dresses, especially, were a focus of stories and reminiscing, such as: "Oh! This was such a pretty outfit! Sheila was so embarrassed. She'd never wear it. Because it crisscrosses. ...It was such a riot!" But all the items for sale evoked a certain amount of nostalgia, which could be shared with Cathy's parents as well as occasionally the children, for example:

We got it [changing table] in Windsor before Sylvia was born. It had already gone through two little boys—the changing table .... It's the kind of thing that's kept its value. It's a wooden one. It's not a plastic one and a toddler can climb up the side while you change the baby and not have the whole thing fall over which is a great advantage. When you get to the second child, you have to think of these things.

My mother-in-law sent these [long underwear for children]. They had their Christmas pictures taken in them. Once Sheila pulled off the hat. She couldn't keep her hat on for the picture.

For Cathy, this sale demarcating that she would have no more children, also was the opening to a new phase of her life. She was starting to teach music part-time at a local Christian school. Although she believed that a mother (and father) needed to be there for her children, especially while they were young, she was no longer focusing solely on her children, home, and church. The sale created physical space for new things in the house and for new activities in her life. In her words:

It was a lot of work, but I had so much stuff accumulated...As well as a physically good thing to do, I can find a bit of the basement now. It just was also an emotionally good thing to do because you just feel so weighted down with all these things that are not worthy of being thrown out, but you don't know quite what to do with.

Coming to terms with the decision that there will be no more children can be experienced as a loss for many women. At one sale that was filled with baby paraphernalia—high chair, crib, playpen, clothes--I observed to the seller, "It looks like there will be no more babies." Her eyes misted a bit and she quietly said, "I just hope they go to a good home, with someone who can really use them."



## MULTIPLE PASSAGES

Jessica Potter, a European-American nurse in her early 40s, held a sale for several reasons, each one demarcating a different life passage and not all of them entirely her own. The primary motivation was to get rid of items that were her mother's, since her mother, suffering from dementia, had just entered a nursing home. Jessica was stoical about the transition, but she recognized that her mother could use the money from the sale to secure extras not covered by Medicaid in the nursing home. Ironically, a shopper who had known her mother stopped by the sale, and, upon hearing that she was in a home, purchased something of hers as a memento. Jessica voiced that sorting and pricing her mom's things was somewhat painful: "It brings back a lot of memories as you go through items. But that's life. You just put a smile on your face and do what you've got to do." But she also believed it would be better if someone got some use from the items.

Jessica, who lived at her boyfriend's house, was also selling some of the last remaining possessions of his deceased wife. In Jessica's words:

Sometimes you have to remove some of the memories, but you do it very slowly. Like right now some of the things here were his wife's and he was ready. He was ready. And we waited for that. It was six years. We spent six years. He just asked me to remove it. He was just ready. And I marked

most of it for him and it was fine. Everyone just has different ways of dealing with death. It takes time.

They both needed the room now and, as she said, he was ready to let go. This aspect of the sale was a statement that he had substantially gotten beyond his wife's death, just as the main portion of the sale is that "my mom is in a nursing home now."

Finally, Jessica was also ridding herself of the last equipment for housing birds. A shopper came to the sale expressly to get one of her last remaining cages. Jessica had already given away her parrots to good homes, and she had no plans to keep any more birds. While this transition may seem minor compared to the others, it is quite typical of those found in garage sales. We often define our lives through our activities, whether family-related, work-related or leisure-related, and when we change those activities, we often relinquish the material possessions that are associated with them. I have seen many sales in which sellers relinquish tools and supplies related to hobbies such as making jewelry, knitting or woodworking that are no longer pursued. It is also common for multiple passages to occur at one sale.

## MOVING

Shelly Haines, a European-American woman of 34, was selling her house and moving back to the West Coast. She had come to the area for graduate study, but ended up working as a manager at the local food coop instead of on her

dissertation. The last few years she had bounced between Ithaca and Santa Cruz, renting her house when she was out of town. She used to hold regular garage sales with her friends, so she was no stranger to the process. But this was different. This time she had sold her house and was finally moving. Her mother came to Ithaca from the West coast and one of her sisters came from Syracuse to help price and display the entire contents of the house.

As with other major life transitions in America—graduation, marriage, retirement—her family members gathered to witness and support her. They helped her sort through items and engaged in listening to the stories that went with all the items around the house. In this regard, Shelly’s sale is a lot like Cathy’s—family members gathered to assist and witness the passing of this phase of their lives.

Shelly noted:

This time I’m really leaving Ithaca. Previously I was renting the house and left stuff here. I’ve done several mini-purges already, but this is the big purge. I feel really good about not being too abrupt. I’m too sentimental.

There are too many stories and memories here.”

As with other American rituals, this occurred in social space, with public witnessing of the dissolution of identity of “Shelly Haines in Ithaca.” She transformed her goods here into cash, money that could then be used to help

jumpstart her household and development of a new identity as “Shelly Haines in Santa Cruz.”

Hosting a garage sale before moving is very common, but a surprising number of sales occur after a move, even if the movers already held a sale before relocating. Movers often find that even favorite possessions simply do not go well in their new homes or that there is simply not enough space. A memorable post-move sale, although of only fifteen miles distance, included lots of barely used goods: bathroom rugs and décor in green (which did not match the new house’s pink bathroom), some nice art work and interesting decorative items that simply did not work in the new house. Almost everything went for a dollar, so it did not take long for things to disappear. Another example is that of a sale held by a family who had just moved from North Carolina which included furnishings unsuited to the new home. Such movers can either dispose of the “unworkable” items or keep them packed in boxes for the next move.

### DOWNSIZING, DISBANDMENT AND DEATH

Robert was minding the check-out, and it was clear that he and his wife Tammy had selected a lot of belongings for their downsizing sale. Tables were filled with neatly stacked china, Tupperware, kitchenware, linens, tools, and various things their adult children had long since outgrown. When asked, Robert freely

admitted to downsizing. “We should have done this years ago. I can’t believe it’s been 40 years. Forty years!” While they had no specific plan about moving anytime soon, they recognized that it would be helpful to start disposing of things they had not used for a long time and were unlikely to need again.

There are numerous downsizing sales, particularly for those over fifty. Downsizers often have grown children who have moved far away and have left their childhood “treasures”—trophies, stuffed animals, sports equipment—behind, and their parents decided it was time to dispose of the goods. Downsizing opens a space for proprietors to decrease the amount of things they need to care for and to possibly enter the “retirement” phase of life. Such sales mark a “contracting” stage, in contrast to earlier “expansion” involving growing families. Downsizing sales often consist of the low-hanging fruit of items to discard, i.e. things that do not require difficult decisions to eliminate. For example, Amanda Blakely, an African-American seller in her 60s, joined her friend in town to hold a downsizing sale upon her retirement. She managed to part with some of her parents’ old furniture by taking pictures to preserve the memories, but she found herself withdrawing some of her parents’ vases and decorative items because she could not yet part with these family “treasures.” This sort of downsizing selling is also voluntary, inspired by foresight and prudence rather than the pressure felt by those selling the entire contents of their homes in the context of a pressing deadline.

By contrast, household disbandment is “an acute episode of possession disposition” (Ekerdt et al 2004:S265) when someone(s) is obligated to drastically reduce their belongings because of an impending move into smaller quarters, often into a facility to help with age-related decline (current or anticipated). Disbandment usually requires that an entire household, from basement to attic, be gone through and disposed of after the seller(s) selects items to move with them. Commonly, children and other relatives of the person(s) moving get to choose the things they want, and the person moving may, then, give remaining things away to friends and charities. Many people disbanding a household host a garage sale.

Karen Moench and her husband, a retired professor specializing in India, were moving into a nearby retirement facility, one with progressive nursing care. Her husband had a long-term illness and was starting to fail, so Karen was the one to manage the details of the sale and to line up help where possible. She was especially pleased to be able to sort through the entire household full of things before she herself was incapable of doing so. She did not want to leave that burden to her children. The Moench’s new residence was one-third the size of her current home, so that even after their children and grandchildren had selected items and various charitable groups had been given desired goods, a considerable amount of furniture, kitchen items, electronics, and Indian artifacts remained. The disbandment process forced Karen to acknowledge that she could actually get rid of

some of her books since, having not read them by now, she probably never would. She came to a similar concession about her clothing: “I had to be realistic—I’m never going to be a size 14 again in my life.” Karen clearly felt relieved after the sale and her house was empty (she had moved into her new place prior to holding her sale). “I describe it as a lightening of the load of the baggage that you acquire....If you’ve got so much space, you don’t have to make any decisions about what you acquire... You eliminate a lot of the non-essential stuff.” At another disbandment sale, the seller was gladly presiding over the check-out at the sale of her remaining effects, after she had moved into a retirement home. She smiled broadly and said she wished she had done it years ago.

In Montreal, where personal belongings are believed to provide the soul of a residence, those who must disband their houses try to beat back the specter of death and provide the mover a bid at ancestral immortality by successfully “*casser maison*,” or breaking the house (Marcoux 2001). This means that the person(s) in transition strategically donates their possessions to appropriate relatives and friends, with their histories intact, as a means to “ancestralize” themselves. “Casser maison” is a rite that is “aimed at exorcizing the move into residential care” (Marcoux 2001:230), a move that is associated with decline, diminution of faculties and ultimately death. In short, this is a culturally sophisticated way to “beat the reaper.” The rite of “*casser maison*” counters the aura of death by asserting a

continuity of personal identity—ancestralization—through tactical placement of cherished possessions (Curasi, Price and Arnould 2010; Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000) and other significant objects. Most of those undergoing disbandment hold some sort of a sale (Ekerdt et al 2004), and many were able to place their significant objects into good homes (Herrmann 1997) in face to face garage sale interaction. Often they would relate the stories behind the possessions transferred, thereby attempting some continuity of their own history and identity in the home of the new owner. Those who were moving also reaped the benefit of having the buyers obligated to remove the objects from their premises (Ekerdt et al 2004:S270), thereby decreasing the burden of the pending move.

The sale of the effects of a departed relative, often a mother, can serve as a passage for the sellers. One sale of the contents of a nice suburban home drew the grown children back to town from their lives in disparate parts of the country as a sort of farewell to growing up in the house and to the close-knit community. The process of sorting through and selling the items brought the siblings closer to their mother, as they shared memories and stories in clearing out the goods. But one daughter observed that the best part was remembering her mother before she was sick with kidney problems and progressive blindness, a protracted decline which had forced her to stop engaging in the crafts that she had so much enjoyed. They promised to visit one another at their homes in the future, but this sale marked their



farewell to Ithaca. Some such estate sales act as public “announcements” of the passing of a local personage, such as when Susie Chong held a sale after the death of her mother, who was well-known to the community from the restaurant the family had operated for many years.

### COMBINING HOUSEHOLDS

Two European-American women in their 30s, Kate and Barbara, were combining households, moving in together in a committed relationship. Like most couples joining households, they did not need two of everything, and their sale was full of surplus glassware, plates, kitchen utensils, and household items. Kate recognized that this sale was not only the start of a new life for her and Barbara, but also the final stage of her former marriage to her husband. In her words,

This is a big life passage sale! We’re not just moving in together. A lot of the things I had were from a previous long-term committed relationship that I’ve just been hanging on to. And there’s tons of things from that commitment, that relationship. The first thing that went at the sale were from then—the toasting glasses at my wedding. I got married. I’m on really great terms with my ex, and it was sweet and I’ve been a bit sentimental about it. But I’m ready to be done with it! . . . I called him up – and there were these different things he wanted to have, so I made a box for him.

Along with liquidating unneeded excess, Kate was relinquishing her hold of material reminders of her former relationship. Barbara noted that most of the stuff in the sale was actually hers: “Yes, things here that are mine, like clothes I grew out of, my bookshelf, my kitchen stuff cuz she [Kate] had tons of kitchen stuff so my kitchen stuff wasn’t needed. I just didn’t want to throw it away.” Sales of combining households are usually upbeat, even celebratory, and they serve to demarcate a milestone in the relationships of the couples joining their lives. In this case, the sale was also a public statement of Kate’s shift in sexual orientation. Kate and Barbara intended to use the money from the sale to purchase a mattress that they both liked, an item that can also be seen as symbolic of their new union.

## SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

Logan Rothman was a graduate student in computer science and, when he and his soon to be ex-wife sold their home, he advertised it as a “divorce sale.” The sale itself was full of household items, dishes, books and pieces of furniture that the divorcing couple no longer wanted, after they had already selected goods for their respective apartments. They were still on good terms and were essentially splitting the proceeds of the sale. Logan noted:

I would say in my adult life all my sales have been associated with major life changes. I don’t just have them. ...I would say, yes, this was part of the

process of getting closure.... Yes, I would say it was getting a sense of closure since it's connected to everything else. The sale is connected to the selling of the house and the selling of the house is connected to the divorce. The major item for sale that symbolized their marriage was a set of china that they had purchased with monetary gifts given to them at their wedding. They found it unsavory to be bargained down on such an expensive and memory-laden possession, but, in the end, they were relieved to see it go. Neither of them wanted to hang on to it. Logan observed, "We're now done with the mutual belongings."

In years past, few newspaper advertisements ever included such loaded wording as "divorce sale," but, with the advent of Craig's List and other online advertising sites, more florid depictions of sales are becoming common. In the last few years I have encountered some, such as: "Divorce Sale!!!! Everything MUST go...just like 'you know who' had to!!!!" (Divorce Sale!!!! 2011), or this fraught ad: "CRAPAPALOOZA MOVING SALE! Turns out—my husband was a scoundrel, and now I'm having to start all over again, and need your help to do it. COME BUY MY CRAP!" (CRAPAPALOOZA 2011). The seller also hints at the new life she hopes to achieve: "EVERYTHING has to go. I'm loading up and heading west, and don't have room for much more than some clothes and my favorite rocking chair. Everything else HAS TO GO" (CRAPAPALOOZA 2011).

Divorce sales afford a unique opportunity to “trash” the ex by devaluing his/her possessions with rock bottom prices and to settle scores through the ex’s possessions. Terry McMillan (1992:94-5) famously depicted her character Bernadine putting a mere \$1 on all her departed husband’s possessions—an antique car, mountain bike, cashmere coat--to exact revenge after he had left her for a white woman! Not long ago, a woman was reported causing traffic congestion in Superior, WI, with a huge “FREE” and “EX-HUSBAND SALE” sign and all her husband’s possessions arrayed around his green SUV with flat tires and “CHEATER” and a number of obscenities prominently painted in the interior (Huffington Post, 5/18/2012). Such expressions of anger are a means to settle scores and shame ex-partners in dramatic transitions to singlehood, while involving the public at large to bear witness to their life passage transitions.

## TRANSFORMATIONS AND MAKEOVERS

Americans hold a strong belief in the ability of people to transform themselves and their lives. The United States has historically held itself as the “land of opportunity,” with rewards to be found through hard work, second chances and self-help. Makeovers of such things as hairdos, houses, and bodies have even become common fare on American television (Heller 2006), entertaining the public while instilling the notion that change and personal improvement are within reach.

In a small way, garage sales fit into this trope of transformation. Garage sale sellers more or less consciously see their sales as a sort of transformation of their lives.

The woman holding a divorce sale mentioned earlier wrote in her ad: “My Pain is Your Gain! Come buy me out of my old life at bargain basement prices so that I can afford to start anew!” (CRAPAPALOOZA 2011). Another woman held a sale last year from her garage, filled with boxes of things in transition. When asked why she was having a sale, her trenchant retort was, “To get a new life!” She needed to rid herself of the old stuff to enter into a new phase. More felicitous are the sales held to fund some sort of activity or purchase, such as a school trip, a vacation or a new kitchen table, all of which use the transformation of the sellers’ possessions to liquid cash to make them happen.

Colleen, a European-American college instructor of about 52, engaged in a major “life shift” sale, in which she let go of numerous, special identity-imbued items from her past. She sold things from her life of raising children and (now defunct) marriage, such as pet paraphernalia, household items, furniture, crafts and “fixit” projects. She was especially gratified that a young couple who were beginning their own domestic life together purchased many of Colleen’s domestic and fixit items, allowing Colleen to almost transfer her old domestic life intact. In her words:

They picked up my fixit things and with all that stuff, that was the era I was letting go of...I had this sense of release, of no longer keeping that which does not nourish me, but clutters my way.... And the things that were meaningful to me, I had a sense of releasing them to another life.

She mused that “this sale was a significant beginning for me and it really felt different to me afterwards.”

### REMINISCENCE AND STORIES

Most sales, especially major life passage sales, precipitate some life reflection and elicit memories associated with items. This is an important part of the process of shifting from one status/identity to another. Although the literature on life review, life reflection and reminiscing focuses on the elderly (e.g., Sherman 1991), it is now recognized that at least from late adolescence on, life reflection (Staudinger 2001) and autobiographical identity formulation through narrative (Fivush et al 2011) are an ongoing process. When transitioning from one status/ stage to another, it is usually helpful to extract the meanings associated with the old status, and the items that embody and reflect that status, before entering another phase. The process of removing sale items from their quotidian contexts, then handling, sorting, cleaning, moving, pricing and discussing the goods for sale, promotes reminiscing with the friends, family, and/or shoppers who participate in

the sale. Cathy Vanderbuilt was able to review the children's items with her parents before the sale, and with the public during the sale. Shelly Haines observed,

Everything I sold had stories and memories. I learned to knit here at Homespun. I cut my knitting teeth here. They were hard to get rid of, but I had to sell those heavy sweaters I made. I just don't need them in California.

All her belongings had stories and meanings related to her life in Ithaca, stories that she would sometimes pass along to the buyers. Barbara, and especially Kate, took stock of their lives as reflected in their possessions, and relinquished the past relationship that they represented.

Many participants, both shoppers and sellers, are drawn to garage sale exchange because the goods for sale are imbued with personal histories. Shoppers recognize that something of the seller is passed along, whether it is a generalized sense that someone has used an item or that a particular seller passes along specific story. Chelsea Parker, a retired social worker in her late sixties, loves to hold garage sales several times a year as part of a protracted downsizing. She is quite cognizant of the importance of the historical dimension and the "cultural life" (Kopytoff 1986) of the goods for sale.

Everything has a history and I enjoy passing on the history to someone who might use it. And when I buy something, I'd be interested in knowing who has had that. ... So you want to know whose possession it was before. And

why it was precious to somebody else at one time. So everything almost can have a story to it and I like stories.

Chelsea makes a distinction, however, between those items that she sells that have a “short history” and those, with which she would be loathe to part, as having a “long history.” The latter group includes items from her mother and her now deceased husband that are too precious for her to part with.

Time can blur even the long histories and the memories attached to possessions, however. One seller, an African-American woman in her 80s preparing to move after living in her house for over 60 years, stated:

I was going down memory lane last night when we started pulling out these things. Some of these things brought back a lot of memories....But [items for sale] some of them I've had so long I can't even remember where they came from. ...It's been so long I can't remember who or what. I've been in this house for over 61 years.

She was soon to move to Kentucky with her daughter and son-in-law and she had to part with most of her household goods, glassware, and knick-knacks.

## MONEY

Popular understanding holds that garage sales are held for the money, but as those who sell at them can attest, the amount of monetary proceeds is often



disappointingly small. Although the sellers who were disbanding their houses reported only modest proceeds, “the money realized from sales did matter to our informants, especially for defraying costs of their move” (Ekerdt et al 2004:S270). Further, whatever cash is generated feels like “special money” (Herrmann 2006), as the items have already been bought and paid for, and whatever they receive extra. In the context of viewing life passage sales as rituals, the items sold are ritual objects that have been manipulated, that is, removed from the domestic context, cleaned, priced, and displayed, and then transferred, i.e., exchanged for some amount of money, leaving the seller with both more cash and more space.

Sellers vary in the degree to which they are interested in deriving money from their goods. Logan Rathman, who had once worked in retail, used marketing techniques to draw shoppers to his sale and to maximize his take. He did not believe that it was worth his while to hold a sale otherwise, so he made sure everything was priced a bit high (to allow room for bargaining) and he grouped like items together for better sales. Other sellers, such as Chelsea Parker are more concerned with managing their memories and placing items in a good home than in financial recompense. Many who hold large sales, such as a household disbandment or a major move, start off trying to maximize their cash intake, but eventually need to get rid of the goods at almost any cost when the moving van is immanent, a motivation shift necessitated by circumstances.

## PHYSICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND SOCIAL SPACE

A primary reason for holding a garage sale is to create space. The removal and disposition of excess items to create physical space is often needed for a new baby, a workshop, remodeling, and the like. A European-American woman in her late 20s, upon moving back into her house that had been rented out, held a sale to clear out the tenant's remaining possessions, noting, "I want to create space. This room needs to be empty so I can do my framing [her business]. I just want the space." But a sale very often also creates "mental space," or the emotional and/or cognitive room that allows people to pursue new endeavors and other potential selves (Cross and Marcus 1991). It is next to impossible to separate the physical and psychological dimensions, since the transformation of the physical space usually has a correlative transformation of identity, status, and/or activities. With Kate, for example, ridding herself of the goods that reminded her of her past marriage allowed her the room to develop something new with Barbara. Likewise, Cathy was able to expand into a new phase of her life that involved part-time teaching outside the home after disposing of her baby items. Aside from the very real practical aspects of selling unneeded goods before moving across country, Shelly was also shedding her Ithaca life, allowing her to create a new identity in California. And Jessica could take a step further in accepting her Mother's new

status as nursing home resident, while her boyfriend has further let go of his former wife. Logan was finally able to fully separate the shared space and belongings he had held with his ex-wife. Almost all sales, even yearly clean-outs, represent at least some small passage by means of creating space for new potential.

Garage sales additionally serve as rites of passage by virtue of their occurrence in the realm of the social (Jaffe 1999). Sellers invite the public at large, through newspaper ads, electronic notices and local signs, to assist them in getting rid of items and to witness the process. Contrast this with the solitary effort of putting things in the trash. Dropping things off at a charity certainly has socially redeeming aspects, as well as a tax write-off (which is often the most economically rationalized means of disposing of one's used goods, given the frequently small garage sale earnings). But donating to charity is usually not witnessed by significant others nor is it as pronounced a statement of self. As Cathy Vanderbuilt noted, "a garage sale is just more personal than giving things to Salvation Army." Rather, a social gathering at a garage sale in which the seller is surrounded by the things to be gotten rid of, creates a public statement about who one once was and who one is now becoming. At its extreme the pronouncement of divorce by the woman in Wisconsin who effaced her ex's SUV, reached the national news and she was able to very publically shame him. Family members, friends, neighbors and co-workers often assist in the garage sale event and, as significant others in the sellers' lives,

bear witness to their sales and corresponding transformations of identities, just as they do with other rites of passage such as graduations, weddings or funerals.

### PASSAGES FOR SHOPPERS

Life passages in garage sales also can be documented for shoppers, but they are not as readily apparent as for sellers. Shopper transitions tend to be more protracted through time and across multiple sales, and the statements they make about self and identity are often more subtle than for sellers. The other side of ridding oneself of excess belongings before a move is to then shop at sales after the move to replace items not relocated. Such a shopper might be making an extended statement about having just moved to the area and wanting to get to know about it, (and to purchase needed items). Shoppers, like sellers, are active agents who are constructing new spaces and identities as they go from sale to sale. A classic example is Lori Marsh, who, upon learning she was pregnant, began to look for baby items at garage sales. Sellers at those sales regaled her with stories of birthing and advice about what items work best with infants. After a series of sales, Lori's identity as an expectant mother took hold and became established in the social space of the sales. Similarly, Pam Ciachi, as she went to many garage sales by Hawaiians in Maui with her toddler granddaughter in tow, established her identity

as a "tutu" (grandmother), a sort of honorific position among native Hawaiians, many of whom care for their grandchildren.

Specific sales may mark turning points, often psychological, for shoppers. Jamie Velesq, a Hispanic-American computer technician of about 40, recalled how he reconnected with this past at a sale. As a child he collected dinosaurs (before they were trendy) and he had a nearly complete collection of Marx dinosaurs. But in his 20s and early 30s he felt he had to act "adult" and never looked at such things. One day in his mid-30s at a sale, he saw that a boy had the missing Marx dinosaur in his hand. Jamie "thought, damn!... But his mother made him put it down. And I thought, I'm just going to walk over there and pick it up." Jamie had found the missing link to his childhood collecting and his boyhood fantasy, and he was ready to reconnect with his past. In Jamie's words: "It was the ending of a quest to have that complete set. I continue to collect dinosaurs when I find them [at sales], but I feel satisfied that I completed the one set that I always wanted when I was little." He was later able to extend his boyhood fondness for GI Joes through sales and now he even sews uniforms for them. So, as for many shoppers, Jamie broadened his adult identity to include his childhood shopping, just as Lori's identity shifted to expectant mother and Pam's to being a Hawaiian "grandmother." It is also likely that the young couple who purchased all of Coleen's "fixit" items would mark the start of their domestic life together with the goods from that sale.

## CONCLUSIONS

Garage sales are rites of passages for everyday Americans involving the sale of selected personal possessions. This article has focused on the more salient life passage sales, those that, not coincidentally, also feature the largest amount and types of goods. Moving sales, for example, enact a ceremony of departure and often a shift of life pursuits and orientations, especially for major relocations. Combining households sales involve selling happily superfluous objects, while those for divorcing couples demarcate noteworthy life passages by eliminating possessions now tainted by love gone sour. Later life sales, those that involve downsizing or disbandment, allow sellers to enter the phase of life that involves contraction and simplification. Or, in selling a deceased relative's effects, sellers can find some closure and the mental room to move on.

Most sales, whether for mundane housecleaning or a major move, signal some shift in surroundings and/or pursuits. Many sales are generated by the growth and development of families, and ultimately their contraction. There is a continual need to clear out paraphernalia from fast growing children, as they progress through various phases and activities of life, such as infancy, toddlerhood, sports, scouting, crafts, music and pets and multiple sizes of clothes and shoes. There are likely as many types of passages as there are sales, and what has been discussed here has not

been exhaustive, but rather suggestive. We can see, however, how sellers, and even shoppers, create and confirm emerging private realities through public exchanges. Transactions in sales help to make the possible real.

Through garage sale exchange, American participants engage in minor makeovers of their lives. They remove still useful goods from their homes and sell them to others, transforming the goods into space and money. This allows them to make a fresh start with whatever space is created, including physical space in basements and guest rooms, as well as personal psychic space which allows for new selves to emerge. Reminiscing or sharing memories and stories associated with certain objects can ease the transition. Enactment of sales in social space ratifies and bears witness to the changes precipitated by sellers. Still useful possessions are also transmuted into cash, which provides further means for personal development and new identities. Given the importance of possessions in creating and maintaining personal identities in modern American consumer culture, life passage garage sales provide something of a fresh start for those who hold them. For many Americans, then, the transfer of the stuff that clutters their lives can open room for new enterprises and new beginnings.

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> This research is based on over 25 years of participant-observation on garage sales, during which I interviewed more than 280 shoppers and sellers, observed more than 3,000 garage sales, and held over a dozen myself.

<sup>ii</sup> Names and identifying characteristics of the informants have been changed to protect their privacy.