

Living with Things: Ridding, Accommodation, Dwelling.* Nicky Gregson. Wantage, UK: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2007. 193 pp.

Reviewed by Pauline Garvey

This book represents a perceptive look at the various practices of discarding within homes and the consequences and considerations involved in the flow of goods within and between households.

The author, Nicky Gregson, commences with the contention that against the backdrop of work situated within the home, the on-going routines of living with and divesting of possessions frequently falls out of focus. There is perhaps no other domain where the management of people and things so intimately coalesce as in the home and Gregson examines the situations whereby very ordinary, overlooked things can punctuate everyday routines and become visibly problematic. Dealing with these things addresses the material appendages to households and their impact on everyone living there, as well as others beyond. Suddenly what we all unreflexively understand is eloquently spelled out: practices of ridding imply the presencing of people.

Gregson carried out in-depth research in a county Durham village with diverse households from a variety of economic and social circumstances. While she finds many decorative strategies broadly “normative,” the working through of tasks such as moving house, redecoration, or modernization throws up issues that map onto personal narratives and domestic aspirations in surprising ways.

Touching on, but reworking Heideggerian ideas of dwelling, we are introduced to the significant distinction between accommodating and accommodations in dwelling. Accommodating gives name to the myriad practices we put in place to fully inhabit a place with human and non-human others. It represents how we “make-do” or compromise certain preferences, for example. Gregson argues that the specifics of our accommodations with others frequently happen through the mediation of wanted and unwanted goods. A home might be an accommodation, but it is only through such interactions that we truly dwell there.

The book describes some “enclaved goods” that materialize memories but focuses more on everyday consumer durables—dishwashers, TV stands, microwaves, and clothes—to analyze the forgotten stories that punctuate daily lives when they become problematic. The foregrounding of unnoticed things can come without warning, such as when a kettle refuses to function. Suddenly these unconsidered appendages to daily life, on which we routinely depend, can erupt into visible existence. The fallacy that “function” is the only consideration in the removal or containment of kitchen appliances is evident as respondents negotiate numerous social relationships in order to

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secure a temporary or final destination for the broken dishwasher or washing machine. Without such support networks any action may seem impossibly daunting.

Ridding then, is neither a linear nor a straightforward process. And the trajectory of things shows how certain practices of keeping and disposing are part of a narrative of self. Narrating self and social relations is frequently accompanied *not* by appropriating but through staggered removal or complete expulsion. The form that ridding takes therefore is of key importance in indicating how something no longer accommodates the home's residents. For example parents feel obligated to rank children's old toys according to emotional registers in addition to disposal practices. Sentimental investment in such possessions demands a conceptual shift in which objects are removed from the household, but not expelled.

Moreover social identities are not only facilitated through ridding but constituted through the practice of on-going interaction with stuff. Sleeping for example comes with a requirement for personal possessions that transform a sleeping arrangement into an active presence. As the author demonstrates, accommodating sleep for children successfully involves the creation of appropriate spaces, accomplished through toys, beds, and clothes. Accommodating visitors on the other hand implies a revisitation of personal taste, a review of the self refracted through other eyes. Without such efforts we run the risk of being designated as "bad parents," "inconsiderate partners," or "inhospitable hosts" or self-designate ourselves as somehow not up to scratch. Gregson documents on-going negotiations through relationships within the home between spouses or between interactions with external others such as the local council and their residents. She finds the process is not easy nor straightforward but mired with conflicting aspirations and values.

This work takes its place among other studies of disposal (Thompson 1979; Rathje and Murphy 2001; Hetherington 2004) but Gregson does not include domestic refuse in her study. Her stated reasons for this absence are that she aimed to challenge any easy designation of things as 'waste' as they radiate outwards from the home. Instead she shows that the work of disposing frequently involves holding onto broken appliances—such as a microwave until relatives can gift a replacement. Instead of absent presences (Hetherington 2004), Gregson attends to the "living with" as much as the "disposal of" burdensome matter.

Through unfolding stories Gregson subtly illustrates the ways in which the home and its material constituents are continually moving between different boundaries within the household; to neighbors or family members; to sheds; to skips; to the tip. After reading this book, one is left with a vivid sense of a continual radiation of material culture from households in Britain that not only highlights the temporal and spatial fluidity of household matter—always on the move—but also causes us to consider how such movement of household goods extends its traditional boundaries.

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