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THE 'CASSER MAISON' RITUAL

Constructing the Self by Emptying the Home

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Abstract

This paper addresses the relationship between mobility, ageing and death in an urban housing market from a material culture perspective. It examines a divestment ritual performed by elderly people in Montreal (Canada) on the occasion of a move from a home on their own to a care environment. This move which is often a move into a smaller place and a smaller set of things is also accompanied by the compulsion for the people to divest themselves of some of their belongings, a process that is called 'casser maison', literally 'breaking the house'. This ethnographic paper reveals that 'casser maison' is not only a matter of getting separated from some, if not most, of one's possessions, however. It is also a matter of placing those possessions among the kin or other potential recipients. In this respect, 'casser maison' pertains to a ritualized form of construction of the self through the emptying of the place. It proceeds from the wish to ancestralize oneself; the capacity to place one's possessions is taken to guarantee the survival of the subject and of his or her memory. As such, this paper demonstrates that, through the use of personal belongings, the divestment of the self becomes a form of investment.

Key Words ◆ ageing ◆ death ◆ divestment ◆ memory ◆ mobility ◆ Montreal

INTRODUCTION

Many studies in social and health sciences deal with the move from domesticity to care among elderly people (Allen et al., 1992; Choi, 1996; Hockey, 1990; Kraaij et al., 1997; Thomasma et al., 1990; Tobin and

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Lieberman, 1976). Some focus on the possessions that elderly people take with them when moving (Rowlands and Marcoux, 2000); those 'transitional' objects (Mehta and Belk, 1991) that migrant people and people on the move use to re-objectify themselves in a new environment (Parkin, 1999). Other researches emphasize how 'traumatic' the separation from personal belongings may be. Thomasma et al. (1990), for instance, note the concern of some institutionalized elderly for the loss of personal possessions. They mention that people who had to give away or sell furniture on the occasion of a move, or those who had to move into a room that was equipped with a 'hospital type' bed or dresser, had fewer opportunities for reminiscence after moving. Having said that, few have examined how agents actually divest themselves of the home environment. This process of divestment of the home is often neglected in the research on residential mobility, especially in the case of elderly people. It is neglected when it is not simply denigrated as in the case of Vereecken (1964) who speaks about donation and the elimination of certain objects on the occasion of house moving as an act of destruction.

This paper seeks to fill this gap by examining the relationship between mobility, ageing and death through the use of objects, of mobile objects. In the line of Chevalier's (1996) works on the transmission of the furniture in France, this study also examines how people get separated from those possessions that they *don't* take with them when moving into a care environment. This is referred to as '*casser maison*'. '*Casser maison*' differs from the 'clearing out' of homes in Britain which is performed after their occupants' death (Finch and Hayes, 1994). It is a process in which elderly persons actively divest their home 'by themselves'. This paper thus examines how people separate themselves from their possessions in a ritualized way when moving into residential care. How, in other words, objects are used as mediator in a context of loss. It will be argued that when the divestment process is performed successfully, the emptying of the home becomes a means of constituting the self, an attempt at reaching the status of ancestry. The following discussion is based upon an ethnography conducted in Montreal (Canada) between September 1997 and July 1999 among the Francophone community. My informants are aged between 78 and 89 years old. Data have been collected through participant observation, by accompanying people in the process of the move. In this regard, whenever possible, I accompanied them in their search for an accommodation. I helped them sort out their belongings, move and settle.

EMPTYING THE PLACE

The move from domesticity to care is a move from a situation and a place where a person is on his or her own to another one where he or she is

cared for. It is about moving into a care environment which provides services such as catering, hygiene, surveillance, housekeeping and basic medical assistance (CMHC, 1997). Most of my informants who moved from domesticity to care moved from a house or a self-contained apartment into a boarding residence, into a bedroom that measured from 23 to 35 m². These rooms are often equipped with a private en-suite bathroom and the meals are served in a communal room. What is important for the purpose of my discussion is that this move is also a move into a smaller place as well as into a smaller set of things. As such, it is a move which forces people to sort out things. It entails a compulsion for a person to separate from some, if not most, of his or her belongings; what is commonly called '*casser maison*', literally breaking the house.

In the popular parlance, '*casser maison*' is associated with the departure from the family house.¹ For example, Mme Gaumont², a person met during my fieldwork, sold her house because it 'became' too big, too difficult to maintain. She could not take care of it by herself since her husband had been institutionalized. In the grief of this crisis context, she had to abandon the house in which she had stayed for 34 years. What made her decide to sell it and to move, as she explained, is that it is one of her sons who bought it. 'It is a chance that my son takes the house' as she put it. She could thus give him many pieces of her furniture. '*Casser maison*' is not the prerogative of homeowners alone, however. The tenants that I met often claimed to do so. We should note that in Montreal nearly three-quarters of the dwellings are rented (Statistics Canada, 1996 Census). We must also say that the housing sector for elderly people is almost entirely a renting market (CMHC, 1998). I would like to suggest that what allows those tenants to claim to break house is the fact that in Montreal possessions are often considered to be at the heart of the construction of the home. Indeed, people in Montreal, especially the tenants, create their sense of place with their possessions. They locate it within those possessions, those possessions with which they move. For this reason, I will argue that people inhabit their things as much as their place. Provided that possessions are important to such an extent in the creation of place and in the sense of a '*maison*', it is common to hear among the elderly people in the process of moving, even the owners, that it is the things themselves that make the house *their* house. And to hear them say that the emptied house is deprived of its soul. '*Casser maison*', thus, also entails the separation from some of those things that constitute that house; what my informants described as their estate, their '*patrimoine*', I should rather say, their '*matrimoine*'; what Chevalier (1996) calls the 'furniture capital'. This includes the inalienable things, those that matter, those with which a person represents him or herself, those that are dear to that person: the inherited objects, the family heirlooms, and so forth (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton,

1981; Chevalier, 1993, 1994, 1998). As such, the divestment process explains why the occasion of the move into a residential setting can be experienced as a trauma or a crisis. It can be compared to the dispossession process concomitant to the institutionalization described by Goffman (1961) by which a person is stripped of the belongings that help define him or herself and that are at the heart of the constitution of a sense of place. For example, Mme Hebert, an 89-year-old widow who moved into care declared spontaneously at the eve of her move, almost in a strikingly grievous manner, that she was attached to 'all' the things surrounding her: her family heirlooms, the souvenirs of her husband, the sole souvenirs of her late husband in fact. Mme Hebert did not regret moving into an institution as she put it, as much as the obligation to part with her belongings and mnemonic artefacts. '*Casser maison*' also calls upon an extended notion of the 'furniture capital'. It entails the separation from the mundane, day-to-day artefacts that constitute the idea of a 'proper' home, of what it is to be on one's own, such as the broom, the dishes, the microwave and the Tupperware that the person won't be needing any more.

'*Casser maison*' produces anxiety. It is sometimes feared. It can even delay the move, not to say deter a person from moving. The emptying of the home itself is often a difficult experience. Mlle Bolduc, for instance, an 89-year-old single woman who moved into residential care simply refused to attend to the emptying of her apartment where she had lived for 10 years. She felt incapable of assisting in the emptying of her apartment and to move into a new one that would be empty as well. It is the '*peur du vide*', a fear of emptiness which prevented her from doing so: the physical fear of losing the familiar surroundings and of becoming alienated, the fear of losing oneself when the place disappears. Mlle Bolduc went to stay at her sister Mathilde's home, for one week while Mathilde took charge of the emptying and cleaning of the old place. During that week, Mathilde also moved her sister's belongings into her new room, organized it and decorated it. She hoped to save her sister the shock of having to face the empty surroundings. She hoped to 'smooth' her sister's move and to give her the impression that there would be no move at all.

People often attempt to transform this compulsion to empty the home into a constitutive event, however. In other words, the emptying of the home is often used for creating the self. In this respect, it challenges the common idea that people take what matters to them when moving. Not only will '*casser maison*' be a matter of deciding what to bring and what to leave behind, it will also be a matter of transmitting, donating, 'placing' those other things. '*Casser maison*' will be a matter of constructing oneself in the family's memory through the transmission of those things that do not accompany a person. As such, '*casser maison*'

raises the importance of what Chevalier (1996) calls the people's 'transmission project', namely the ways in which they wish to transmit their estate, '*patrimoine*' or '*matrimoine*' to their descendants. In some cases, it will even consist in inventing some descendants for oneself. 'Where to start? With what to start?' are expressions that we can often hear among the people confronted with the need to get separated from their things. If we lend a cautious ear, we can also perceive: 'Where will the rest end up?'

GIVING OF ONESELF BY GIVING ONE'S THINGS

The transmission project is sometimes planned a long time in advance, before deciding to move, without even thinking about it. Mr Richer, for instance, an 81-year-old man living alone in a three-and-a-half-room rented apartment had prepared his transmission a long time before moving was an issue.³ This blind man really inhabited his possessions as I have argued earlier. He knew the position of every single object in his apartment. He knew the places of all his cups; at least, he used every cup he knew how to locate. Mr Richer knew which photographs hung on the wall of the living room: photographs of his daughter, of his granddaughter Isabelle, of a birthday card sent by Isabelle, a card written in hieroglyphs, beside a postcard representing Champollion, a postcard sent by Isabelle as well. He knew that other framed photographs were on the green dresser, a piece of furniture that this *bricoleur* made by himself out of a humidifier. But he was unaware of the fact – or maybe it simply did not matter to him – that these photographs were often askew, that sometimes they were upside down, or simply back to front, facing the wall. He saw them in his mind. He could describe them. He could pick them up and handle them.

When I first met him, some six months before he moved, Mr Richer was thinking about staying put. He was hoping not to have to move somewhere else, that is, into residential care. In any case, he had already performed the distribution of the things of his apartment. In his view, the day he would leave that place, he would have passed away or moved away into an institution; he wouldn't require those things anymore. He divided his 'furniture capital' among the children and grandchildren with whom he still had contacts. Mr Richer, who got divorced 14 years before, had relations with only two of his six children and their offspring. These were the persons concerned by his transmission project; the others were excluded at that time. The living room set, the only souvenir of his wedding, was intended for Lucie, one of his daughters. It took on a special meaning for him. It mattered that Lucie got it. The chest which he had made himself was intended for Véronique, one of his granddaughters. The chest of drawers was intended for Isabelle, another

granddaughter. The sideboard was intended for Thierry, a grandson. The kitchen cupboard as well as a small bookcase were intended for Claire, one of his daughters. The clock was intended for a friend of his. And so forth. In fact, Mr Richer intended to bequeath nearly every piece of furniture of his apartment to the children and grandchildren; nearly all of them because he never really expected to move anywhere else. Mr Richer had kept those things with him for years. But he was not simply keeping them. He lived into those things even though, for him, they already belonged to those recipients. In this particular case, it could probably be argued that the transmission project helped Mr Richer to orientate himself. Orientation refers, in the health care professionals' colloquial discourse, to the 'three spheres' of time, space and social relations. In this sense, one would say that a well oriented person, a person that is 'well in his or her three spheres', does not suffer from any dementia and is able to situate him or herself in time, in place and in relation to others. It is through the creation of a transmission project that Mr Richer situated himself in space, in his own material environment. And, by the same token, that he oriented himself in relation to others. And it is through its reactualization, its reassertion, its narration that the project was kept alive and that his memories were maintained alive as well.

In other cases, when the imminence of the move asserts itself, when the decision to move is taken or the need to move imposes itself with acuity, people invite the children and the family members or any other potential recipients together or separately, to let them choose among their things. For example, when Mme Cabot moved into a non-profit Catholic residential care setting, her children split her belongings between themselves. Laurence, her daughter, picked up the mahogany table, the mirror and the lamp that Mme Cabot had inherited from her own mother. Marie, her other daughter, chose the couch, two tables and the lamps. Other things, the cut glass and the silverware tray, the dishes and the sweet dishes as well as the plates, Mme Cabot's wedding gifts, were divided among her two daughters. The appliances, the dining room set, the linen, the sheets, the pans and the saucepans went to her son's religious community. She simply explained that it would be useful for them. This equates to the transmission of the things being gendered as Gotman (1988) puts it. Some things are particularly intended for women, others for the men. Gotman reports that jewellery, linen, sewing instruments and so on, 'all the objects ennobled by the domestic works of the past' (Gotman, 1988: 164) are more likely to be predestined for women; daughters and granddaughters. This appears clearly in the case of Mme Cabot, who passed to her daughters objects that she herself had inherited from her mother. Those objects are not gendered in any simple sense, however. Their transmission rather helps to create the idea of

gender within the family. In fact, as it appears in this ethnography, gender is also constructed through the transfer of certain objects from the mother to the daughter, and then, as it is expected, to the granddaughter, highlighting the role of women in the transmission of memory; a role already stressed by LeWita (1988) in her study of the bourgeois culture in France.

Mme Cabot knew too well that with her, many things would disappear: the card games that she and her mother used to play, the cooking recipes, the narratives that her mother used to recount about their life in Saskatchewan when she was young, a difficult life as she emphasizes. This is probably why Mme Cabot was happy that the division went well. 'What suited one, did not suit the other, and vice versa.' She was happy that her daughters took her family souvenirs with them, that they took those things that she herself had inherited from her mother a long time ago and that stood as important for her. Above all, she was pleased that those things could remain within the family. She was pleased that it was not 'strangers' who got those objects and items of furniture. She even admitted that she would have preferred to sell them if her daughters had not taken them. She cared for what she called the 'continuity', and the transmission of her belongings provided her with such a sense of continuity. In fact, as it appears here, the donation is embedded in a set of expectation. It is expected that the divestment will maintain the relation alive. That the divestment will become a form of investment. What is striking in the case of Mme Cabot is that those things that mattered more to her were transmitted to her daughters who themselves had children. The other things were given to her son's religious community which constitutes, in a sense, a 'dead end'.

House movers may also attribute selected things to particular people. Mme Debray, to take her as an example, gave her things in a form of *pre-mortem* inheritance, '*de son vivant*' as she put it, which I translate here by 'giving of one's living'. Mme Debray, a 68-year-old widow twice married who could be described as coming from a bourgeois family, moved from a private residence for autonomous persons to a private residential care setting. On that occasion, she gave all the things, as she explained, that couldn't fit into her new place; everything from the family heirlooms to the silverware set and the souvenirs of her late husband; her cherished things like her books, things that this woman of letters considered important, 'what I have to offer' as she said. The thing in history (Weatherill, 1988) or the historical patterns of transmission of that thing, as well as the thing's own historical biography (Kopytoff, 1986) is important here. Mme Debray searched for the children's and the recipients' interests. The one who is related to each particular object. Among the books, the 'Célines' were for one recipient, the 'Baudelaires' for another one 'because he is romantic just like me' as Mme Debray

put it, adding, 'I know what their tastes are'. People make personal statements through the donation of mobile objects. What prevails is then the quality of the object, not its financial value. There is a parallel, here, with the garage sale in North America and the preoccupation of some people of transferring their possessions to those who will 'really' appreciate them (Herrmann, 1997). The garage sale is an occasion on which people may lower the price of certain items when they are sure that the person really wants them. The transfer of an object is then compared to an 'adoption' by a suitable owner. It is accompanied, as in the case of Lois Roget described by McCracken (1988), by instructions on how to use it, how to keep it, how to care for it. The donation takes the form of an 'apprenticeship' of the objects. People learn about themselves by learning from the objects. Because what is created through this apprenticeship, what is nourished and constituted is the relationship between a donor and a recipient. Mme Debray's example shows us how '*casser maison*' may relate to the desire of a person to control the ways in which he or she will be remembered; how it translates a certain desire to push oneself through time; how it becomes a means for objectifying future memories as Rowlands (2000) puts it in his study of time capsules; a means for controlling future memories. In the case of '*casser maison*', it is important to control the dispersal of objects, to make the good 'placements', to find the person who will be the most appropriate for such a piece of furniture or such an object. It is a matter of appealing to different people in different ways; to give things according to their specificity more than their financial value, which a partition through a will would entail.

Like Mme Cabot, Mme Debray is an example of self-realization. She emphasized that she enjoyed being able to make people happy, but also that giving things of her living had been a relief. Mme Debray was relieved because the distribution was equitable. I would be more inclined to think that she was relieved because she felt that she had not imposed her belongings on her recipients. She was even delighted when one of her sons asked her for a particular dish, the one that she used in the past to prepare leek and potato soup. She recalled with pleasure that when she wanted to bring calm into the house, when things were not going well, she used to prepare a leek and potato soup which '*ramenait les enfants à de meilleurs sentiments*' what we can translate by 'bringing them back to better feelings'. Being asked for a particular object, an object that was otherwise 'condemned', in this sense, is like being desired. As if people and things merged. As if they were experienced as an undifferentiated whole. Giving the cherished thing, in the spirit of Mauss (1923–24), is then to donate of oneself, namely '*se donner*'.

The separation from certain things felt to be important may, nonetheless, be experienced with difficulty. Mme Debray admitted that she felt

a twinge of sadness when her children chose two very particular items, things that were particular for her: the iron-made candlestick made for her by her late husband as well as a cross that her mother gave her in the past; things that she cherished and that became inalienable for her; things that contained the memory of cherished persons. She described the separation from these mementoes as an ordeal. People do not necessarily accept giving everything, however. Mme Debray, to take up her example again, refused to give one of her sons a lamp that he asked for. The lamp had been made for her by her first husband, and she considered it as a 'presence' as she put it; a lamp 'that really talked to her'. She wanted that lamp to 'accompany' her into her new place, as if she wanted to move with her former husband. She was not willing to get separated from it, 'yet'. To insist, as she did, on the fact that she was not ready 'yet' shows how the divestment is progressive. It demonstrates that the divestment goes smoothly, as if peeling oneself along the successive moves.

PARTING AND REPEATING

Interestingly, in contrast to the situation prevailing among the people met by Chevalier (1995, 1996) in France, the estate or the 'furniture capital' is conceived independently from the fixed asset, from the house. It can be transmitted separately from the family house. Also, in contrast to France, the estate does not take on its value from its 'assemblage'. It *can* be split without threatening its commemorative value. Even though, at first sight, the divestment of the home gives way to the dispersal and the scattering of objects that stand for the self and that are important in the constitution of selfhood, when it is performed adequately, when a person is able to transmit him or herself to those who will care for them, a feeling of preservation and wholeness emanates from it. This is the paradox of '*casser maison*'. The multiplicity of acts of donation should not be seen as a decomposition of the estate, even less of the self, but as repetitions. Repetitions aimed at achieving mastery, or, as we will see further, the 'good death'. Things can then be parted without risks of dispersal for the self because it is the transmission project in itself rather than the collection of things *as a collection* that embodies the donor's selfhood and the potential of realization for the self. Consequently, the divestment of the place and the scattering of things associated with the self are reminiscent of the deliberate sacrifice of the *Malangan* sculptures of New Ireland; those sculptures that are conceptualized as 'skins' which replace the decomposed body of a deceased person and that are 'killed' in a ceremonial exchange in an attempt to control the construction of memory of the deceased (Küchler, 1987, 1988). The objects that are divested on the occasion of

'*casser maison*' do not so much embody memories of past events, but just like the *Malangan* sculptures, they become in themselves embodied memories condensed as things as Küchler would put it. In other words, they stand for the person and for the person's survival in the memory of others. This becomes evident in the light of the incapacity to donate of oneself.

THE DEATH OF THE THING, THE DEMISE OF THE SUBJECT

'*Casser maison*' can also be experienced with grief because of the incapacity to donate things, for being incapable, in other words, to find heirs. This is the case of Mlle Bolduc, a childless single woman who invited her brother and sisters, her nephew and her nephew's children to choose among her belongings at the eve of her move to residential care. She expected that her belongings would interest someone. After all, as she said, these were still useful things; they were in good condition. She was confident that someone would take those articles like her sideboard that she described as part of her life, her complete dinner set, ornate with 18 carat gold; a set that she bought for herself as a treat. In fact, she hoped that those things would interest someone because these mattered to her; they had a '*vécu*'. Contrary to the rolling stone that gathers no moss, they had gathered experience through the passage of time. But nobody came to choose them. No one responded to her invitation. Hence, Mlle Bolduc gave her sister Mathilde her stacking up tables that were already written in her will. Another set of tables that Mlle Bolduc associated with a late friend of hers were taken by the daughter of her nephew who put them in storage. She had offered these to her other sister. But that sister refused them because they couldn't be transported in her car. Mlle Bolduc did not offer to deliver them, however. She refused to beg the reception of her belongings. As if it were better, as I have said earlier, to have the objects asked for and to be able to feel desired. Otherwise, the granddaughter of Mathilde considered taking her bed – a 'queen size' bed – but she changed her mind after measuring it because of a lack of space. Mlle Bolduc had to give it to the St Vincent de Paul charity organization. She gave that same charity organization many other things as well: a lot of cloths as well as her favourite sideboard. Mlle Bolduc was hurt, according to Mathilde, that no family member took her belongings. She spoke of the pain she felt when incapable to donate what she cared for to the people that mattered to her. She confessed to me that she would have liked someone to take these things. For her, these things went 'everywhere'. But she had no idea where they had gone. One understands the difficulty for Mlle Bolduc of seeing all those things which she had lived in until then 'leave

her', 'disappear'. One understands why she spoke about those things that she brought with her into her new residence as those things that she had been able to 'rescue'. '*Casser maison*', then, provides a picture of the extent of one's relations, those who will or who could remember. It forces one to take the measure of one's isolation. Mlle Bolduc's case is in fact that of an imperfect divestment. A form of material divestment that does not result in any form of reinvestment in relations.

As these examples show us, things do not cease to be important when people separate from them. What mattered for Mme Cabot was to be able to 'place' her things among close people. What was important for her was that people accept them; that the people who would accept them would be those who could instil in them a second life and would care for them which would in turn instil in her a longer life. Entrusting one's belongings is thus somehow like entrusting oneself. The capacity to place the things stands as a guarantor for the survival of the subject, of his or her memory. Even though she described herself as 'detached' from her belongings, Mme Cabot admitted that she was not detached to the point of being indifferent to their beneficiaries. It is probably *because* she could place those things among significant relations that Mme Cabot could claim to detach herself so easily from them. Put another way, drawing upon Weiner (1992) who examined the paradox of giving while keeping, that is how giving is a means of retaining, Mme Cabot never really had to detach herself because she could give her belongings to significant others. Another example is that of Mme Hebert who confessed that she was able to 'condition herself to the idea of getting rid of her things', to detach herself from the souvenirs of her husband she cherished inasmuch as she was able to transmit them, as much as the recipients of her belongings wanted them and would care for them. In fact, what distinguishes Mlle Bolduc from Mme Cabot and Mme Hebert or even Mme Debray is the possibility of placing or not those things that don't accompany the person in the move. This brings us back to the issue of inequality between the elderly persons with children and those without; an issue raised by Déchaux (1996) when discussing the caring of the elderly persons. More broadly, it relates to the availability of heirs and the ability to surround oneself in old age. In the absence of recipients, the inalienable thing like Mlle Bolduc's sideboard falls escheat as Gotman puts it. For my part, I would assert that the object actually dies, and its death relates to the symbolic demise of the subject. This is probably why the incapacity to give one's possessions, to give of oneself through the donation of things, relates to a form of exclusion or isolation. This is probably why it corresponds, in the end, to sterility in its most complete form. We could probably go further by saying that '*casser maison*' raises the broader issue of reproduction, fertility and the negation of discontinuity. As such, '*casser maison*' pertains to funeral, not to say pre-funeral

practices, among which, following Bloch and Parry (1982), fertility has a considerable prominence. More than a simple reassertion of life in the face of death, as Bloch and Parry argue, mortuary rituals themselves are the occasion for creating society. Death becomes a source of life; an occasion, in a sense, to liberate the agency contained in the thing.

At this stage, I would argue that '*casser maison*', donating oneself through the donation of one's things, testifies to the desire to reproduce oneself through one's children: namely extend oneself in one's children; the child being seen as the self (Miller, 1997). As such, Gotman would probably say that '*casser maison*', inasmuch as it pertains to the giving of one's living to one's children, is a prodigiously ambiguous gesture: a gesture in which the will to dominate, as we will see later, approaches that of submitting oneself and making oneself the child of one's child. This narcissistic act is not selfish in any simple sense, however, it amounts to an act of love and of sacrifice. It figuratively testifies to a desire of the parent to die for the children.

GIVING OF ONE'S LIVING

This reflection should be situated in a broader discussion of the legal and anthropological aspects of inheritance in relation to social structures. It poses the question of the relationship between things and persons and that of the alienability or inalienability of property. Mauss (1923–24) argued, for instance, that in Melanesia things are never completely separable from the persons who exchange them; subjects being transformed into objects, things becoming parts of persons and persons behaving in some measure as if they were things (Munn, 1970). The inalienability of the person and things relationship is central to the understanding of the devolution of property. For instance, in Kangra, in the north-west of India (Parry, 1979) where the Mitakshara system is in force, ancestral property is held in common by a man and his descendants as co-sharers, and any one of them can demand partition at any time.⁴ The Mitakshara system distinguishes, in fact, the self-acquired property over which a man has full rights of ownership from the ancestral one over which heirs have rights from the moment of their conception. In other words, the members of the senior generation are trustees rather than absolute owners of the joint property. They have no right to sell or to give away the joint capital to the detriment of the other shareholders.

In contrast, the devolution of property in the Province of Quebec relies upon a 'modernist' distinction between person and objects (Rowlands, 1993), not to say a modernist illusion (Latour, 1994). Furthermore, it responds to a limited testamentary freedom of British inspiration; a system of property inheritance being consistent with a society's

general orientation to individualism (Finch et al., 1996; Macfarlane, 1978). In English law, the basic principle of testamentary freedom is that

each testator is free to dispose of his or her property entirely on the basis of individual choice. The testator alone decides how his or her estate is to be divided, and who will receive it, and the law upholds the right of each individual to do that, however eccentric these decisions may seem to other people. In its purest form it implies the absolute right of the individual over property, in death as well as in life. (Finch et al., 1996: 21)⁵

This principle of testamentary freedom was introduced for the first time in 1774 after the British conquest of Nouvelle-France in 1759 through the Quebec Act.⁶ In 1801, the Quebec Province Law was revised and some legislative limitations were brought (Carisse, 1970; Zoltvany, 1971) so that, contrary to the situation prevailing in Britain, only legal and natural heirs can inherit by testament. Since the Civil Code reform of 1994, a 'reserve' principle of French inspiration in favour of the surviving spouse has also been introduced.⁷ In fact, the Quebec Law distinguishes between the partition of the family estate and the succession. Half of the net value of the family estate is devolved to the surviving spouse. In other words, a donor cannot bequeath the totality of his or her belongings to a third person other than his or her spouse. The surviving spouse has right over half of the family's estate. These include: the main residence, the secondary residences intended for the family and, what is relevant for the purpose of our discussion, *the furniture in those residences*. It also includes the cars intended for the family and the rights over a retirement scheme⁸ accumulated during the time of the marriage or any other retirement saving plan (Government of Quebec, 1999). Once the spouse has received half of the family estate, if there has been a will, the succession will be shared according to the will of the donor. Otherwise, if there is no will,⁹ the succession will be shared according to the cases determined by law.¹⁰

'*Casser maison*' appears to be a particular case of donation of one's living or gift *inter vivos* which is itself related to inheritance. But it raises and exacerbates the need to distinguish the legal aspects of inheritance from the anthropological ones. It is sometimes intended to take the place of the will or compensate for its absence. Mr Richer, for instance, had written a will some 10 years before. But he wished to rewrite it in order to distribute his belongings differently. However, Mr Richer moved before he had the chance to rewrite his will. As such, the move forced him to enact it. '*Casser maison*' is also a matter of donating the things, including even the tiniest ones, which are not even part of the will, those mundane, day-to-day objects that bear in themselves the trace of their occupant. In other words, '*casser maison*' is a

matter of performing the inheritance before time, of preparing one's death.

THE PERILS OF THE GIFT OF ONE'S LIVING

In her analysis of inheritance in France, Anne Gotman (1988) admits that giving of one's living may have exorcizing properties; that it can become a way of divesting oneself, of casting oneself before being constrained by others or by death. In other words, it can become a means of liquidating cumbersome things. Gotman insists on saying that in an egalitarian inheritance system such as the one prevailing in France (a system itself inherited from the Revolution) giving of one's living is also an act of authority, a way of buying others. In the line of thought of Mauss (1923–24) for whom to give is to make sure to receive later, Gotman argues that the donation of one's living empowers the donor.

The perception of the donation as an authoritarian act could explain why some of the recipients of my informants were so reluctant to accept the things intended for them. Their refusal could indeed probably be seen as the refusal to become indebted towards the donor. There are limitations to the application of Gotman's thesis to the situation analysed, however. It rests on the obligation, in the anthropological sense, of the recipient to receive the inheritance. This is what Gotman calls the 'duty of reception' of the heirs. In the cases observed in the course of my research, this obligation to receive does not always prevail. Recipients often dodge and evade the acceptance of things. In practice, indeed, things do not go always as expected. Mr Richer's sons took the living room set that was intended for his daughter Lucie as we have seen earlier; a set that she could not take because she was living in Europe at the time of the move. Mr Richer's son took it for his partner's son. Afterwards, when Mr Richer realized what had happened, when he realized that the things would not remain within the family, he admitted he was angry. He even talked about reclaiming those things, about '*dédonner*', until he resigned himself, to use his own expression, to kiss the whole day goodbye. His sons also took the kitchen utensils and the pots and pans in order to store them, saying that 'those who may need it will only have to help themselves'. Mr Richer expected, for his part, to help his family members to settle. There are also examples in which the children perceive the emptying of the home as a good opportunity to seize things as it appeared during this ethnography. A professional social worker confided to me how the children of one informant had not been involved at all in helping their parent to move, how they simply showed up at the time of the distribution of 'gifts'. It is also plausible to think that a recipient may accept a gift in order to make the right impression, for improving his or her position in the subsequent will's division. Inversely,

there are examples of recipients unwilling to accept the things intended for them as a way of refusing to acknowledge the parent's forthcoming death; refusing to lose faith in the person or refusing to tempt fate: 'You have too much to live for' is a common expression. Children may also refuse to talk about any eventual disposition. They think, as Lois Roget declares, that 'we are going to live forever' (quoted in McCracken, 1988: 47).

Goody's view on the power of the donation of one's living differs from that of Gotman. In his discussion of the relationship between inheritance and power, Goody (1962) holds that giving of one's living may become a form of 'social euthanasia' before the physical death. Using the cases of the transfer *inter vivos* of chiefship and land rights among Nyakyusa of Africa and Irish farmers passing over the control of the farmstead at the time their children marry, Goody suggests that this form of donation may improve the condition of the younger generation but that it also weakens that of the older. For by giving one's inheritance, by renouncing his or her rights, as Goody argues, one can be expected to lose his or her purchase power over the younger generation. This form of transmission which also recalls the practice of 'parental endowment' in the Province of Quebec¹¹ illustrates the importance of not giving too soon when giving of one's living; a topic at the heart of many literary works such as *King Lear* (Shakespeare, 1606), *La terre* (Zola, 1887) as well as *Trente arpents* (Ringuet, 1938) to name only a few.

Interestingly, Goody's discussion raises the importance of transmission strategies in the case of valuable assets. It allows us to think that in a context like Britain, for instance, the decision to divest and sell the house could be related to the wish to organise the financial aspects of the transmission. Indeed, under the Inheritance Tax, gifts *inter vivos* are subjected to a preferential regime in Britain when made 7 years before the death (Finch et al., 1996). In Canada, even though the federal and provincial governments do not levy succession rights on legacies, giving of one's living remains a means of reducing income tax on the future appreciation of assets inasmuch as it may reduce the administrative fees of the succession (La Presse, 4 March 1998). This might be important in the case of the homeowners. Most of my informants, however, were tenants. They did not possess important assets like houses whose future appreciation could be taxed. As a matter of fact, it is important to recall that the elderly people housing market is a renting market. In Goody's line of thought, this senior generation of tenants could indeed be expected to be weakened. It is even plausible to think that the fear of losing one's power, or more simply one's 'attraction' once divested, might add to the explanation for the reluctance to move on the part of elderly homeowners. Nonetheless, I would argue that one's financial position may affect the ways of approaching

the divestment. At least, it should point to differences between social classes, between the wealthiest people, those with assets behind them or those with highly valuable things to donate like Mme Cabot who could approach the divestment with confidence, and those for whom divesting the place is the only means of being remembered. Take Mr Richer for example who had nothing of value to transmit. He had to think of a cunning way of emptying his home and placing his things. He donated the items that made up his personal environment – the things bearing his mark – to people who successively came to give him a hand in moving. Mr Richer gave Marcel, one of his friends, some chairs, a few planks of wood he had collected but which would be useless to him now, pots of screws he kept for his little works, pots of paint, turpentine, tools as well as a book. This fairly experienced *bricoleur* offered ‘his’ tools with pride to one of his sons who refused them, however. He also hoped that he could help Judith, a young friend of his, and her partner who were just about to settle into a new house. He hoped they would accept his kitchen set, a chest of drawers that he had made himself, neon lamps, a fan, a pastry plank, a barbecue oven, even the remaining food and drinks in the refrigerator; things that he refused to waste. In fact, Mr Richer attempted to attract people to help him by offering small gifts to them, for he obviously did not want to leave anything behind him. But these people did not come for the things he had to offer. Rather, they accepted those things to please him. In any case, money is not an issue here. Mlle Bolduc’s sideboard, her double bed or Mr Richer’s living room set, unlike money, are things that take space. Mathilde, Mlle Bolduc’s sister, told me that her grandchildren were not willing to get rid of their own pieces of furniture to put in those of their aunt. These objects are objects that leave traces. These are objects that bear memories and the presence of the person. These are objects that have the potential to stand for the person because they have a presence. Imposing these objects can be like imposing oneself. In fact, in the context described here, it is not the act of giving of one’s living which is an authoritarian act, but the act of giving a particular object. In other words, some articles may be perceived as authoritarian.

This emphasis on power probably leads us to underestimate the symbolic importance of the transmission. Inheritance may take on its importance at the social and symbolic levels independently from the marginal value or utility of what is transmitted. I will go further by contending that ‘*casser maison*’ will be perceived to be all the more important if the person has nothing else to transmit than this ‘furniture capital’. As Miller (1994) emphasizes, many disputes over inheritance in Trinidad only apparently relate to control over important resources. Rather, they are often related to the sense of family descent. In this line of thought,

while Goody emphasized the perils of giving, I will rather insist for my part on the perils of *not* giving. I will suggest that '*casser maison*' can be perilous when a person is unable to donate his or her home, unable to donate him or herself and to make the things circulate (Godbout and Charbonneau, 1996; Godbout, 1998), which becomes clear in the case of Mlle Bolduc who could not achieve her transmission project. In any case, in the context under study, an individualist society characterized by the absence of lineage (Godbout and Charbonneau, 1996), a society where people's identity is weakly defined by inheritance as is rather the case in India (Dumont, 1980), the donor is hardly in a position of doing favours on the occasion of '*casser maison*', let alone of using the donation as a generous symbolic gesture or an authoritarian one. In the best cases, the donor can request that others accept his or her offering, that they make some space for those things and for him or her in the *décor* of their domestic environment and among the relationships that are acknowledged as Chevalier (1998) would say. It is difficult, then, to talk about the donation of one's living as an authoritarian act. It would probably be the opposite. Let us just remember that one of Mr Richer's sons considered the possibility of not accepting the furniture intended for him. But he changed his mind when he realized that his father would probably be too disappointed. He decided to accept these things to 'leave him this pleasure' as he said and to give them to someone else later on. As this example shows, it is the act of receiving that becomes an act of generosity; the donor falling, in a sense, at the mercy of his or her recipients. It is the recipient who is doing a favour by being willing to accept the belongings. In the last instance, it could probably be argued that what is in peril is the gift itself.

GIVING OF ONE'S LIVING IN A RITUALIZED WAY

The passage from domesticity to care whereby a person on his or her own becomes a person who is cared for is feared as being accompanied by a change in status; in some cases, a loss of status (Finch, 1989). And yet it has to be administered by that same person. In other words, it requires that the person in loss of autonomy takes charge of the process. I have mentioned earlier that there were often discrepancies between the donor's expectations and those of the recipients. Perhaps, the most important discrepancy relates to the fact that the former acts as if administering the succession before time whereas the latter often consider the event as a simple mundane donation. Indeed, from the donor's perspective it is important to give to this move a special significance. I would even argue that there is an attempt, from the elderly person's point of view, to ceremonialize and to ritualize the metaphorical and material transition that accompanies it, and to do so in the form of

'ritual longing' as Arnould et al. (1999) would say, who studied the transmission of heirlooms in North America. '*Casser maison*' can probably be understood as a rite of passage in the sense given by Van Gennep (1909) and Turner (1969) inasmuch as it is intended to mark a rupture in the critical moment of an individual's life. '*Casser maison*' is a rite aimed at putting an end to the mourning entailed by the separation with a known environment, with the belongings constituting it and with an aspect of the self left behind. It is also a matter of divesting from the things that are not strictly speaking part of the succession as Gotman puts it. The personal belongings of the person, the food in the refrigerator, the picture frames on the walls as well as the hooks that hold them. Adopting the ritual analysis's vocabulary, we would then say that the '*casser maison*' ritual's efficacy relies upon the emptying, the cleaning, the symbolic 'killing of the place'. It is aimed at exorcizing the move into residential care; a move sometimes associated with death (Hockey, 1990). This is clear in the case of Mme Hebert who refused to acquire any new things or clothes after emptying her home because she did not know how long she could use them. At her age, as she declared, 'it could happen very fast'. '*Casser maison*', in this respect, is aimed at allaying the fears of a move which can prefigure death, not to say lay the conditions for it. It is thus an attempt to control death and its unpredictability.

To a certain degree, '*casser maison*' is aimed at achieving some level of mastery over the arbitrariness of the biological occurrence (Bloch and Parry, 1982). It is aimed at achieving the 'good death'. As such, 'Mme Debray' who had already given almost everything of her living and who used to say that her will would be short clearly gave the impression that by divesting her home and placing her belongings somewhere else she had been preparing for her own death. In fact, she died less than two weeks after she moved. But as she said, she was happy to have been able to give of her living. She felt she was 'blessed'. On the other hand, the incapacity to donate one's things and to donate oneself enjoins the risk of a 'bad death', that of not being remembered.

RECREATING THE SELF AS AN ANCESTOR

'*Casser maison*' reiterates Seale's (1998) claim that in modern societies death is actively socially constructed while at the same time psychologically negated. Seale challenges the thesis that modern societies are 'death denying'. He argues that the modern social organization of death is, I quote, 'remarkably active' (Seale, 1998: 3). Seale acknowledges, however, that at the psychological level, the problem of death is evaded. As such, '*casser maison*' is probably one of those attempts that he describes as

attempts to transform death into hope, life and fertility . . . which combine to 'kill' death and resurrect optimism about continuation in life in spite of loss and certain knowledge of one's own future death. (Seale, 1998: 3)

'*Casser maison*' starts from a compulsion to detach oneself. It evolves into an appropriation of the move as a constitutive event. Indeed, subjects divest themselves from their belongings not simply by separating from them or from the place that these belongings stand for and mediate. They try to place them, to donate them and to donate themselves. Put differently, '*casser maison*' is an attempt to use the emptying of the home, the purging of the place, for reconstructing the self, in other people's homes and memory. It is an attempt to survive one's own physical presence, accede to a form of transcendence and to renegotiate one's status. In this respect, '*casser maison*' can be seen as a ritual, a secular ritual (Moore and Myerhoff, 1977) nourished by a belief in a sort of transcendence to take up Segalen's (1998) expression. '*Casser maison*' does not so much rely upon a promise of continuity but on the desire for continuity: the desire to perpetuate oneself. It goes along the acceptance of a loss of status for acceding to another higher status: that of a quasi-ancestor. It becomes an attempt to invent an ancestor as Goody (1962) would argue. It becomes an attempt to invent *oneself* as an ancestor should we say, to make oneself an ancestor.

As an act of auto-ancestralization, the '*casser maison*' ritual contrasts with the construction of ancestors by ritual experts through funerary ceremonies along the descent lines as in the case of the Paiwanese (Tan, 2001). It also differs from the redistribution of roles and property of the deceased among the LoDagaa of Ghana (Goody, 1962) inasmuch as it takes place before the physical death of the person. But this only reasserts the point made by Hertz (1960) and by other anthropologists (Bloch and Parry, 1982) that death does not occur at one instance, but is the result of a lengthy process. This is an idea that the metaphor of the 'journey' (Bloch, 1993) exemplifies well just as much as that of the 'move' as it appears here. '*Casser maison*' is not only a means for managing the move. It uses mobility to construct the self in old age and to construct one's death. As such, it is a divestment process performed with a view towards the future: that of being remembered. It is a form of divestment which translates the will to control how to be remembered. It is a form of investment in relations.

In the end, '*casser maison*' reminds us how the individual is engaged in a combat against his or her own death and what I would call 'forgetfulness'. As such, if we were to paraphrase Joachim Dubellay (1558), the 16th-century French poet, we would say happy she who, like Mme Debray, can give of one's self; she who, like Mme Cabot can 'place' her belongings, find them a place and find herself a place. Happy he or she who can donate things for he or she can donate him or herself.

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Notes

1. See for instance the documentary *Casser Maison* (1988) produced by Gilles Brissette and presented on Radio-Qu ebec in the course of the programme '*C'est la vie*'.
2. In order to protect the anonymity of the respondents, the names have been changed.
3. A three-and-a-half room apartment in Montreal means three rooms plus bathroom.
4. The *Smirtis* set out another principle: the Dayabhaga system holds that a man's heirs acquire their rights only by virtue of his death. During his lifetime they have absolutely no rights in his property, and the owner has complete freedom to do exactly what he likes with it (Parry, 1979).
5. Although, as Finch et al. (1996) put it, testamentary freedom without restriction has been the exception rather than the rule in England, existing if at all, between 1833 and 1938.
6. Quebec Act, 14 Geo. III, chapter 83.
7. The French legal tradition of inheritance is based on the idea that certain family members, especially the children, have the right to an equitable share of the parents' property (Finch et al., 1996; Gotman, 1988). For instance, the French Law forbids a donor from disinheriting his or her children. The 'legal reserve', the portion of inheritance that cannot be withheld from legal heirs, depends on the number of children. It consists of half of the inheritance when the donor has only one child, two thirds when the donor has two children, three-quarters when there are three children, etc.
8. *R egime enregistr e d' pargne retraite* (RE ER).
9. Legal succession or *ab intestat*.
10. The Law determines the persons who have a right to inherit, the order in which they are eligible to inherit as well as the share that they can receive.

11. Under the auspices of the *Coutume de Paris* which prevailed in Nouvelle-France from 1664, the parental endowment was a contract by which a donator, usually an elderly person, transferred the rights over the land and in return, the recipient takes care of the donator until his or her death (Postolec, 1992; Martel, 1979).

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