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Abstract: In many white colonial and transatlantic families, heirlooms store wealth generated by, and at the expense of, the enslaved. Disconnected from their violent origins, such objects make wealth palatable, transmitting it down generations. This paper lays bare the domestic practices of inheritance, which encompass the keeping of and caring for objects, and selective remembering and silencing that endows heirlooms with filial significance. This intergenerational labor has largely been enacted by white women, and thus this paper argues that this labor of forgetting is a female technology—even if in service of a patrilineal genealogy. **Keywords:** heirlooms; inheritance; slavery; reproductive labor; decorative arts; family

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs describes a transaction between her grandmother and her grandmother's owner. Her grandmother had loaned her owner \$300, with which she purchased a silver candelabra. Upon the owner's death, Jacobs's grandmother applied to the estate's executor to be repaid, but was told that the estate was insolvent. Instead, the executor *sold* Jacobs's grandmother to pay other debts. Jacobs noted that this did not "prohibit him from retaining the silver candelabra, which had been purchased with that money. I presume [it] will be handed down in the family, from generation to generation" (Jacobs 1987, 20). The executor sacrificed Jacobs's grandmother's freedom, and the labor by which she had somehow accumulated hundreds of dollars, for the wealth of white descendants. Janet Neary writes that "by showing how slaves are distributed along with other objects, such as family heirlooms, Jacobs

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reveals the workings of the chattel principle and the genealogical disavowal upon which racial slavery is based" (2016, 159). It is likely that this piece of silverware is still out there, stored in someone's cupboard or displayed on a sideboard, silent and long since disconnected from this origin story. It would be only one of many domestic objects purchased with fortunes made from slavery and passed down generations. Such family heirlooms sequester capital generated by, and at the expense of, the enslaved. Neary argues that these "mementos of the past and literal bearers of value for the future" implicate "private family keepsakes in a regime of racial terror" (2016, 159). Their provenance not only throws cherished objects into a new light that elicits filial shame; it also challenges the innocence and legitimacy of the privilege that these objects embody. The stakes are high: the revelation of an object's violent origins demands that we recognize the privileges that heirlooms transmit.

Neary's call to (re)connect sentimental heirlooms to slavery is a first step. But in order to reveal the violent origins of such objects, we need to understand the practices that have concealed that violence, since the operations of concealment are extensions of that violence. In this essay, I will examine some of the techniques by which the family heirloom naturalizes the wealth of white families—a circular operation of sentiment, which incentivizes and is engendered by historical amnesia. *To forget* is a verb—and the act of *forgetting* is a constant, if unconscious, labor that erases and thus inoculates the object from its implication in regimes of terror. Caring for heirlooms entails iterative domestic labors of cleaning, storing, and storytelling that are ongoing processes that maintain both their sentimental and fiscal value. The domestic sphere conceals the implications of inheritance in heirlooms that often reside in the dining room. In this paper, I bring discourses on domestic (feminized) labor into conversation with theories of historical memory and silencing.

This analysis relies upon my personal experience as a daughter, grand-daughter, and niece within a postcolonial family in Australia.² As Ashley Barnwell writes, "Intimate family practices channel and conduct political currents, as two colonial processes—dispossession and transportation—reverberate across generations" (2018, 448). This encompasses manifold strategies of organizing and endowing objects with meaning. But it is only by "tracing family practices of both narration and silence [that we can examine] how the legacy of colonial narratives and discriminations can also be seen to meander into the intimate sphere, in the stories we tell both

within and about families" (Barnwell 2018, 448). This is intimate knowledge, traceable through lived, personal experience. We cannot unravel filial strategies of both narration and silence from the outside, as though we are neutral bystanders. The position of neutrality is a fiction that shelters us from our own implication in the layered violence that we study. I will not hold myself apart from this history. Rather, I will excavate it from within. Throughout this essay I use the first-person plural pronoun we. This we refers to the descendants of perpetrators—specifically of those who enslaved or profited from the enslavement of people kidnapped in West Africa. I am part of white postcolonial family—a subject position that I simultaneously inhabit and seek to interrogate.

The Secret Life of Heirlooms

The heirloom is a particular kind of object. It exists at the threshold of public and private systems of value. The term priceless heirloom is a commonplace that denotes the irreplaceable nature of objects imbued with sentimental value.3 Following Arjun Appadurai, we might understand heirlooms as "ex-commodities"—that is, as things "retrieved, either temporarily or permanently, from the commodity state and placed in some other state" (1986, 16). The financial value of family heirlooms is complicated by the accrual of sentimental and historical value. But seemingly noneconomic, personal forms of value (which only become visible when someone dies and filial procedures of inheritance take hold) are entangled with economic value. Igor Kopytoff insists that an object's nonsalability gives it an aura that sets it apart from ordinary things (1986, 69). However, the distinction between the "common" exchangeable object and the rare, unique object is never really hard and fast. Indeed, they overlap: sentimental value wrests economically valuable things from the world of finance—the liquidity of which also poses a threat to the family as a transgenerational organization of wealth. Sentiment tacitly prohibits the sale of objects for personal enrichment that might be frittered away in the daily survival of an individual. The stories we tell about objects—those auratic material resonances that heirlooms carry—capture and retain value in the object precisely because it cannot be exchanged for anything else. To mark an economically valuable object as a sentimental heirloom is to sequester it: we imbue objects with private sentiment by telling stories that inscribe them with filial significance. Thus, the heirloom secures intergenerational

wealth. This seemingly intimate exchange of sentiment is in fact an operation of power, which," Kopytoff writes, "asserts itself symbolically precisely by insisting on its right to singularize an object, or a set or class of objects" (1986, 73). Taken out of circulation on the open market, the object participates in a slow arc of circulation over generations. Outlasting the individuals who own it, the object conducts the conditions of its own inheritance.

Much labor has gone into disconnecting heirlooms from their less palatable implications. We should not think of the heirloom as a static object but as a spur to and product of active social and material practices. A trace of this remains in an earlier instantiation of the term *heirloom*—the fifteenth-century Middle English term *ayre lome*, meaning "inherited tool or implement." While the word has come to refer to any item of financial, historical, or sentimental significance, an heirloom in the original sense of the term is a tool—an object with a purpose—implying and eliciting particular techniques, skills, and strategies. As "special" objects, heirlooms are rarely used. The reifying process that transforms *tool* into *heirloom* might divest objects of their original functionality, but only to have them take on different, psychosocial functions of sequestering wealth and expunging their origins. The heirloom is at once an object that must be maintained as well as the very techniques by which it is maintained. The object and the habits surrounding it are mutually sustaining and thus inseparable.

This requires a shift in how we understand the object, one that aligns with current theories of material agency, object-oriented ontology, and thing theory, which all hold, in varying degrees, that we ought to revise our anthropocentric account of the world and acknowledge the liveliness of the material world in which we are entangled. Thinking of the object as having agency, though, does not require that we divest human agents (in this case, the colonizing plantocracy) of their culpability.⁵ There is no innate reason that recognizing material agency should eclipse the agency and responsibility of human actors. Instead, we should take an assemblage approach in which human and object agencies are entwined. We might venture further than this, to Bill Brown's thing theory, which resists the discursive sublimation of the thing into the object: "Although the object was asked to join philosophy's dance, things may still lurk in the shadows of the ballroom and continue to lurk there after the subject and object have done their thing, long after the party is over" (Brown 2001, 3). In some ways, my work on heirlooms is spurred by the stubborn unassimilable thingness of heirlooms. Nevertheless, this is not a work of thing theory outside or beyond human culture, but rather a reckoning at the confluence of culture and things—materiality and meanings. My research remains invested in the social and human practices surrounding objects. At the same time, it also invests in material agency inasmuch as it glimpses a scenario in which the object's agency disrupts the strategies of silencing at work in filial inheritance. In this sense, we should understand the maintenance of heirlooms as an attempt by families to control and subdue the agency of an object that might tell inconvenient truths.

The Kitchen, the Dining Room, and the Cabinet

My grandmother would keep me entertained in the summer holidays by going through the objects in her house and telling me where they came from, who owned them, and what they meant to our family. In my grandmother's show-and-tell of heirlooms, there was an implicit appeal to my childhood greed: if I polished up the candlesticks or arcane flatware enough, I might one day inherit them. There was a cabinet in the dining room that contained many things we never used: teacups and crystal glasses, Spode Blue Italian decorative plates, silver and brass candlesticks. We would sit on the floor and take things out one by one, holding them as she told me stories about their origins. She would animate this motley collection of things, knitting them together into a larger narrative of the family that seemed, at the time, remarkably whole. Each thing had unique properties, and each thing connected to this cast of characters from the past. Each story gave its object meaning, and with meaning, sentimental value (which is never wholly separable from financial value). The stories were part of the inheritance; their repetition strengthened a specific object's meaning for me. That meaning belonged not to me alone, but to a family—a group of people connected by a constellation that can include a name, a hierarchy, entrenched norms, social and bodily codes and choreographies, legal bonds, and shared sets of experience. Once a thing's story had stuck, it would do the work of memory almost on its own. Objects reproduced memory—filial narrative—with every encounter.

In my grandmother's house, each object's location disclosed a tacit hierarchy, but one that was not necessarily organized around historical periods. Rather, the hierarchy was an inscription of "private" significance: things that were kept in the trunk in her bedroom were precious, whereas

those that were kept in my grandfather's workshop (a converted garage) were less so. This arrangement of objects within the household, which Judy Attfield (2000) calls the "domestic ecology of things," created surprising juxtapositions. Attfield contends that by holding things from different eras together, the domestic ecology of things collapses historical periodization, which necessarily occludes the provenance of the objects contained within. Inside the domestic sphere, history drags and eras bleed into one another. Such unruly arrangements might reveal the ways in which the past is not neatly cauterized and contained within historical narrative.

The cabinet in my grandmother's dining room had a large hole in the top that accommodated a ceramic basin (now lost) which would be filled with soapy water to wash the "good" china. The object's design tacitly asserted that the things stored in that cabinet were too precious to be trusted with (possibly inattentive) servants. This reveals an important fact about the domestic labor of cleaning: the Victorian housewife (a product of the colonial era even if she never left Britain) would devote herself to domestic service, but as the head of a household staff, she did not do a lot of the hands-on work herself. Since, as Dorothy Roberts writes, "the Victorian ideal of womanhood arose in part out of the institution of slavery," she might be likened to an "overseer" within the domestic sphere (1997, 59). In my family, generations hence, the "help" has disappeared, but the hierarchy of objects remains entrenched—a division of labor and value passed from parent to child in a series of informal and intimate exchanges. The hands-on work (literally the work of touching) has been charged with significance. It entrenches a hierarchy of care that continues to index the preciousness of the object.

Learning how to take care of objects is not an abstract process; we pick up the techniques of polishing, washing, and storing things precisely by polishing, washing, and storing them—informal and repetitive gestures undertaken often under the guidance of a mother, aunt, or grandmother. That is, we learn by practice. We cannot always separate the labor of caring for things from the sensual and sentimental experience of holding things. In performing the everyday care of objects, we reperform the stories that we have been told about them. Such domestic labors are mechanisms of inheritance that metabolize violence. The care of heirlooms reproduces a bundle of silences that protect the attachment of whiteness to wealth. This attachment requires constant maintenance. It is a ritual enactment of a promise to keep heirlooms safe for the future.

The Complexities of Reproductive Labor

There is a growing literature on the reproductive labor, maintenance, and care work of generations of middle-class white women sequestered in the home, and within that literature a few scholars gesture toward themes of race and the history of slavery.⁶ Maria Mies ([1986] 2014) frames white women as the victims of a white male patriarchy in much the same way that the enslaved were victims of European colonizing forces. She writes that "the weak Victorian women of the nineteenth century were the products of the terror methods by which this class had moulded and shaped 'female nature' according to its interests" (Mies 2014, 88). Furthermore, that "the bourgeois class domesticated its 'own' women into pure, monogamous breeders of their heirs, excluded them from work outside their house and from property" (2014, 90). This is an important observation; however, it is equally important that we attend to Mies's conflation of the treatment of European women—their economic and social transformation into the subjugated category of the housewife—with the treatment of enslaved women. Mies sees these two different subjugations as forming the basis of transcontinental solidarity and shared resistance to the same oppressive forces. But we might also see it as a bargain made by white women at the expense of the enslaved. Mies's explanation of the mechanisms of capitalist accumulation, though accurate in its description of subjugated white women, glosses over the interfemale racial divisions that sustain forms of oppression necessary to and emergent from slavery. Mies effectively lets white women off the hook for their extensive role in, and benefit from, slavery as a system.

In fact, archival records show that some white women did very well out of slavery, both as the financial beneficiaries of fortunes built on plantation slavery, and as slave owners in their own right. Hilary Beckles (1999) has shown the extent to which British women in the Caribbean became independent slave owners, often "leasing" enslaved women to urban colonial administrators under the euphemism of "housekeepers." Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers's (2019) book *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* similarly documents the extent to which white women participated in slavery as independent economic agents. The lineage of these seemingly independent women rests upon the subjugation of blackness and its attendant formation of whiteness. While Mies's assessment of "housewifization" as a tool of European patriarchal structures of domination is important and helpful, we need to complicate

our understanding of reproductive labor to account for the trade-offs, complicities, and bargains that shaped and continue to shape the domestic sphere.

To Forget Is a Verb

While the construction of history has conventionally been a masculine territory, women have typically been tasked with maintaining the more sentimental domain of filial memory, and with that, the work of forgetting. Forgetting depends upon selective remembering. We cannot remember everything: if we did, we would be overwhelmed by a great wash of information that would render the past incoherent and unassimilable. Inasmuch as memory is made possible by strategic omissions, it is coterminous with forgetting—foregrounding some elements of history while diminishing or entirely concealing others. But the selection and consolidation of some memories at the expense of others is no mere neurological necessity. For descendants of perpetrators, some memories are profoundly uncomfortable, and this discomfort, entwined with sentimental attachments, is a powerful motivator for forgetting. If, as Jack Halberstam asserts, women are the repositories of generational logics, then we also have to acknowledge the alliances that many women have made in becoming the agents of such generational logics (2011, 70).

The dialectic of memory and forgetting is a tool of the powerful that might, following Michel-Rolph Trouillot, be called silencing. In his historical study of power and memory in the Haitian Revolution, Trouillot defines silencing as "an active and transitive process" deployed by the victorious: "Mentions and silences are thus active, dialectical counterparts of which history is the synthesis" (1995, 48). Trouillot likens these active processes to the embodied, iterative routine of tying a shoe, a species of memory so ingrained that it does not involve explicit recall (1995, 14). Friedrich Nietzsche, too, gives an account of forgetfulness as an active rather than passive process. In the second essay of The Genealogy of Morality, he writes that forgetfulness makes room for the noble functions of ruling (Nietzsche 2000, 494). This forgetfulness is "not merely a vis inertiae" but rather "an active capability to repress, something positive in the strongest sense" (2000, 494). While active—something we do—it is not conscious. Just as Trouillot uses an everyday routine to explain how forgetting becomes habitual, Nietzsche likens it to digestion, a "thousandfold

process" which is the very instrument of our survival and the most fundamental of physical functions. Mental digestion (*Einverseelung*) is a means of absorption, just as inheritance is a naturalization that incorporates that which is absorbed into the filial body. Unconscious, extractive forgetting is not the discarding of what we do not want to remember, but rather the incorporation of it such that it seems so natural that we do not think about it at all.

Historical amnesia is perhaps better described as an operation of suppression rather than of forgetting, by which things are hidden but never really disappeared. Adapting the concept of the unthought known from Christopher Bollas and repurposing it to understand her status as a post-Holocaust German citizen, Gabriele Schwab (2010, 7) writes that silencing "constitutes a dimension of the unconscious that emerges from experiences that have been lived but never fully known."8 Within this (post)psychoanalytic frame, he conceives of both the self and the mother as objects—but not as static. This slippage between object and agent (which holds potential for theories of object-oriented ontology) posits the mother-object as a transformative process (Bollas 2017). In Schwab's formulation, the unthought known is a species of memory that has not been lived firsthand—memory that has been harbored and suppressed across generations—a kind of anti-inheritance, the absent center that constitutes inheritance. Knowledge that is unthought lives "in the back the mind," as if the mind were a theater with actors waiting in the wings to deliver their lines.

The family transmits its lore through a chain of intergenerational conversations. It only takes one parent to omit the crime of slavery to break that chain—to stop declaring complicity and allowing a silence to settle around difficult histories. Thus the crimes of our ancestors are silenced and metabolized. They become second-, third-, and fourth-generation memories. But they do not go away: they remain as unthought hauntings, subsonic presences detectable through objects. Not wanting to surrender the heirloom, we habitually hold its implications at bay. Having evolved nuanced forms of silencing, we fill such silences with stories, little mythoi of the family that deflect by sharing memories that eclipse the gaps in which uncomfortable questions lurk. The objects that we inherit carry these stories, and as such they help us to metabolize and conceal the (often violent) conditions of their existence. But, since memory is inseparable from what it forgets, they also hold open the possibility of rupture.

The Promise to Reproduce

Decades after my time on the dining-room floor with my grandmother, her death and the attendant procedures of inheritance troubled my understanding of the family's narrative. It is often only at the moment of death, which is also the moment of legal inheritance, that heirlooms may be dislodged from their "proper" place. In sorting through them, photographing and inventorying each object, we disrupted and recalibrated the domestic ecology of things. The process uncovered things that, until that moment, I did not know existed, or to which I had paid no attention. The project of dividing up heirlooms disturbed the order in which they had existed; things previously neglected, ignored, and kept in the places that suggested their unimportance were listed alongside the heirlooms that I had been looking at, hearing about, and caring for over many years. This did not lead to a transparent rearrangement of the hierarchy based on financial value. The negotiation of inheritance was a pas de deux between different forms of value; we were debating not the inheritance of capital—that much was easy—but its entanglement with sentiment and identity. Having inventoried and categorized all my grandmother's belongings, descendants laid claim to an inheritance, pulling it into their own hierarchies of knowledge, signification, and ownership.

Legally and customarily, inheritance follows patrilineal lines—not-withstanding Hortense Spillers's (1987) important essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," which details the reversal of this norm within slavery, where the condition of the child followed that of its mother. The patrilineal lines of inheritance within white families are, however, complicated by sentimental economies of inheritance over which women have often had dominion; objects such as jewelry and decorative arts—the silver candelabra in Jacobs's slave narrative—are typically passed along matrilineal lines and as such might be understood as a bargaining chip in the covenant of patrilineal white inheritance.

Inheritance is a privilege that comes tethered to reproductive responsibility: the conventional language of a last will and testament will bequeath something to someone in a longer chain of inheritance, to the "lawful heirs of his/her body." Indeed, on a more informal scale, the inheritance of some of my grandmother's belongings was conditional; in the very moment that they were offered, I was asked for reassurance that they would stay in the family. Since I do not plan on having children, I needed to allay the concern that the things I inherited would disappear with me by nominating

someone in the family to whom I would pass these things when I die. This offhand, casual question made the logic of inheritance and its ties to an implicit responsibility to reproduce (a child, a genealogical future, a filial narrative) explicit. Biological reproduction, which is necessary to the maintenance of a family across time, is closely bound up with cultural reproduction of filial narratives, the creation of a constituency to whom the stories might be told. The abstraction of the unborn child is the other half of the transgenerational gift exchange that is inheritance. Being within a family is itself a form of responsibility, a lineage that we are expected to uphold. Families impose responsibility from one generation to the next: take care of the things you inherit, and have children so that there may be future custodians of this inheritance. Born as the fulfillment of a generational promise, we also take up that promise to reproduce in a transgenerational cycle by which we occlude the crimes of our ancestors and transmit the wealth begotten from them. As such, we are also born accountable in a call-and-response with histories large and small. If we did not understand ourselves to be part of a family, and entitled to its sequestered wealth, then we might plausibly argue that we were not responsible for those structures that brought us into being. If we were radically severed from this history and did not hold that which was born out of it in our hands, then we might be able to assert our innocence. But we are not.

The Paradox That Produces a Possibility

The heirloom is a paradox at the heart of forgetting. At once a conduit of memory and forgetting, heirlooms are not only material objects but also the practices that surround them and secure their sentimental value. Filial memory attaches some stories to objects and masks others. Stories are catalyzed by and catalysts for care. This is a Möbius strip by which the family traps wealth in seemingly innocuous forms and cloaks the violence of slavery and colonization in sentiment.

At the same time, such objects hold potential for a very different engagement with their difficult histories as triggers for uncomfortable questions. At the very moment of inheritance, they might also call out for a reckoning with their own histories. Thus inheritance presents a choice: either carry on the labor of forgetting, or attempt to rupture the material and conceptual norms of putting things in drawers and cabinets that engineer selective and coherent narratives. As an anchor for the unthought known,

the heirloom is also a vector by which the past crashes into the present. It belongs both to the past and to the future. It is waiting.

My purpose in this paper is to reveal the violence tethered to ornamental, delicate dining implements and decorative arts. This is not a "prescription for repair" to borrow Halberstam's formulation from their introduction to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons* (Harney and Moten 2013, 5). But it is nevertheless a site of possibility: to show that the spoils of chattel slavery are in our midst, and that by dissecting the anatomy of generational inheritance that extends the pernicious logic of enslavement, we might—just might—acknowledge a call to decolonize the dining room.

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Notes

- 1. See James Walvin's *Slavery in Small Things* for evidence of the conspicuous consumption of the plantocracy.
- 2. Like anybody else, my family is a collage of different social classes and conditions, but the branch of the family that I consider in this research is an upper-middle-class Australian one of Scottish and English descent. It is overall highly educated and erudite—no doubt because of the fortunes its members made from slavery—but has retained not much liquid cash from its various colonial exploits. Indeed, my grandparents were so ostentatiously frugal and waste-conscious (partly out of their environmentalist commitments) that I grew up thinking we were poor, if not working class. Their thrifty habits are in fact common among "old money" families—those that retain arcane inheritances but not necessarily "usable" wealth. It's worth noting that the conditions of my own childhood were more substantially shaped by my parents' decision to live an alternative lifestyle, subsisting on unemployment benefits in various and chaotic commune-style arrangements. The connections between postcolonial families and back-to-the-land "hippie" movements will be the subject of future research.
- Consider, for example, the trope of someone who, desperate to flee a wartorn country or feed their children, sells or exchanges some precious family

- heirloom. This is often used to mark the gravity of their situation, a painful breaking of some unspoken agreement about sentiment and filial rights and obligations.
- 4. The ultimate origins of the suffix *loom* are unknown, but the term drags past meanings that resonate within the broader history of slavery that I am exploring. Its northern European antecedent was a nautical term meaning "slow-moving ships" (Liberman 2016). This etymology and its implications are outside the scope of this essay and will be the subject of more in-depth analysis elsewhere.
- 5. In Vibrant Matter: The Political Ecology of Things, Jane Bennett (2009) suggests that the failures of the electrical grid have to be attributable beyond company directors to nonhuman or intrahuman assemblages, and that the cost of this theory is the solid culpability of human actors.
- 6. There are several important critiques of Marxist feminist discourse and its shortcomings when it comes to race, among them bell hooks's (1984) Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center and Angela Davis's (1981) Women, Race & Class.
- 7. The privilege of white women often hinged on matrimony, a theme that I will develop elsewhere. Suffice to say that marriage was one important mechanism by which white women benefited from slavery, and as many narratives of brutal mistresses in the U.S. South attest, this privileged status was fiercely defended. See Freeman 2002 for a further discussion of how the institution of marriage is closely tied to regimes of citizenship and endows its members with rights pertaining to the collective social body, the accumulation of property, and the nation itself.
- 8. I am citing Christopher Bollas via Gabriele Schwab because she is one of the few voices writing from the perspective of the children of perpetrators. However, I want to stress the historical specificity of slavery and its impact on subsequent generations, its way of living in the present.
- 9. For an analysis of this process through photographs see Tina M. Campt's (2017) *Listening to Images*, which might be productively applied to objects.

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