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Growing in Motion: The Circulation of Used Things on Second-hand Markets[1]

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Abstract

From having been associated with poverty and low status, the commerce with second-hand goods in retro shops, flea markets, vintage boutiques and trade via Internet is expanding in Sweden as in many countries in the Global North. This article argues that a significant aspect of the recent interest in second-hand and reuse concerns the meaningfulness of circulation in social life. Using classic anthropological theory on how the circulation of material culture generates sociality, it focuses on how second-hand things are transformed by their circulation. Rather than merely having cultural biographies, second-hand things are reconfigured through their shifts between different social contexts in a process that here is understood as a form of growing. Similar to that of an organism, this growth is continuous, irreversible and dependent on forces both internal and external to it. What emerges is a category of things that combine elements of both commodities and gifts, as these have been theorized within anthropology. While first cycle commodities are purified of their sociality, the hybrid second-hand thing derives its ontological status as well as social and commercial value precisely from retaining 'gift qualities', produced by its circulation.

Keywords: Second-hand, circulation, material culture, retro, vintage, growing, gifts, commodities

> Thus, one of the most important and unusual features of the Kula is the existence of the Kula vaygu'a, the incessantly circulating and ever exchangeable valuables, owing their value to this very circulation and its character.
>
> Bronislaw Malinowski 1922: 511

Introduction

Commercial markets[2] for retro-, vintage and second-hand objects have undergone a dramatic expansion in the last decade across the globe (Franklin 2011: 157). Factors contributing to this expansion have been described in the introduction as well as in some of the contributions to this thematic issue (notably Fischer). In this article we suggest that a significant aspect of the new importance of second-hand and reuse concerns the meaningfulness of circulation in social life. Revisiting the long history within social anthropology of studying the mutual entanglement of material objects and human subjects, we explore circulation as an analytical tool. Circulation does things to people and objects, particularly within the field of second-hand, and we suggest that it can be seen as a culturally generative force that reconfigures objects into objects-in-motion, enabling particular forms of subjectivity. Indeed, circulation seems to be a defining aspect of second-hand objects, distinguishing them from other classic categories of objects in anthropological thinking about person-thing relationships, such as gifts, commodities, sacrifices or art objects. We hope to show that classic anthropological insights, drawn from ethnographic fieldwork there and then, married with recent anthropological contributions on people-thing relationships, have much to offer when making sense of the socio-economic significance of circulation here and now. We are intrigued by how recent writing on the concept of growing, as distinct from making (Ingold & Hallam 2014), can elucidate how circulation transforms things in motion within second-hand worlds. Developing the idea that objects have cultural biographies (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986), we propose a theoretical perspective that sees the circulation of used and second-hand things as involving a form of growth, akin to that of a living organism, in that it results from the interaction between qualities and forces both internal and external to the object. Doing this allows a view of the circulating objects not merely as things that events happen to, but as having agential capacities (cf. Gell 1998), actively contributing to shaping their fate.

Rather than providing an exhaustive account of the different ways that notions and practices of circulation shape second-hand exchange and consumption, our aim is to sketch out some analytical directions that needs to be further developed and empirically examined. Given this aim, the arguments are not tied to a precise geographical or ethnographic context, but are rather informed by observations and insights from multiple sources, mostly describing contemporary societies in the Global North. The article is also inspired by a pilot study conducted in Sweden in 2012-2013, which involved an analysis of media articles, posters, blogs, websites

and various social media related to second-hand shops and consumption, as well as interviews with retailers and shoppers at second-hand shops in Gothenburg. Using a deliberately explorative approach, the article uses these empirical observations as inspiration for some theoretical reflections regarding how second-hand objects in circulation acquire their specific meanings and values.[3]

'Second-hand' is here used as a broad label loosely referring to all kinds of used objects exchanged within commercial contexts. This group of objects can be divided into subcategories, in terms of functionality, time period or aesthetics, for example vintage (Cassidy & Bennet 2012; Fischer this issue), retro (Jenss 2004; Reynolds 2011; Baker 2013) and kitsch (Binkley 2000), each requiring their own theoretical and analytical approaches (see McRobbie 1988; cf. Handberg, this issue, for a discussion of both retro and kitsch in the context of Montreal). Similarly, the contexts and venues for commercial exchange of such objects, and the ways that they are reused, recycled and upcycled also constitute several distinct fields of research (see Gregson & Crewe 2003 for an overview). For the purpose of the argument presented here, however, they are treated as instances of the circulation of material culture that raises a set of common questions, explored below.

Unpacking Circulation

Before turning to the ways that contemporary exchange and consumption of used material culture can be approached from the perspective of circulation, we will unpack the concept of circulation through some of its uses within social anthropology and social sciences in general.

Already the study that laid the foundation of the ethnographic method – investigating social life as it unfolds – dealt with the social and political intricacies of circulation of material culture. In his research on the ceremonial exchange of valuables between islands in the Massim archipelago off New Guinea, Malinowski described the *Kula* ring (1922). Right from the outset, the integrative, embedding and territorializing capacity of material culture in circulation caught the attention of the ethnographer. For Malinowski, the circulation of armshells and necklaces, in alternative directions along the *Kula* ring, calibrated the political economy of the islands involved. The circulation of objects, involving a complex system of exchange among partners, was tied to status, alliances, commodity exchange, and morality. Skilful exchange created fame and renown for the men (sic) participating in the circulation of objects.[4]

The objects themselves, Malinowski noted, were desirable 'articles of high value, but of no real use' (Malinowski 1920: 97), and were not kept for any duration of time, but swiftly passed on. In this way the objects circulating became the mediators of social power and prestige and the circulation itself functioned as the engine of this prestige building apparatus. The most coveted Kula valuables were known by name and their particular history (Malinowski 1920: 99), a form of ver-

nacular provenance. Comparing them to the crown jewels in Europe, however, Malinowski maintains that a crucial difference lies in that '...the Kula goods are only in possession for a time, whereas the European treasure must be permanently owned in order to have full value' (1922: 89). Given that these objects can confer prestige on their owners only by being in circulation they seem more akin to sporting trophies that the winner only keeps for a limited period of time (ibid. : 95).

Circulation thus played an important role in Malinowski's analysis. Regarded as important primarily for how it functioned to integrate and organise society, circulation was studied in terms of the negotiation of its political, social and economic dimensions. As a theoretical phenomenon in its own right, however, circulation and, more specifically, what it does to the objects, remained somewhat in the background.

Since Malinowski, ethnography and theory dealing with the exchange of material objects and the organization of relationships between people and things have developed into one of anthropology's prime fields of research. Scholars have expanded the understanding of gender dynamics of the Kula (Weiner 1976; 1992; Strathern 1988), the extent and nature of the interactions (Weiner 1976; Munn 1986; Strathern 1988) and the nature of the gift (Marcel Mauss 1950/1990). The assumption that circulation integrates society has encouraged the analytical breaking down of circulatory phenomena into finer and more distinct forms, such as commodity exchange, gift-giving, reciprocity and barter, in order to study their social significance and cultural diversity. Along with such specialisation, debates about the theoretical importance of these modes of transaction have been intensive (see Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992 for an overview, and Graeber 2001), but the idea of circulation has continued to receive relatively limited analytic attention. The concern with the typology of transactions has prompted defining the performative locus of circulation in terms of specific stages along such circuits, at the moment when objects changed hands, during which status and relationships between things and people were negotiated within the specific cultural logics of various forms of exchange (cf. Appadurai 1986 and Myers 2001).

Circulation has gained new relevance in the study of globalisation, but is within this context associated with a slightly different set of issues, especially outside anthropology. Retaining its analytically imprecise character it has focused on the state of flux between the nodes of the circuit, concerned with the flows of people, objects and capital across the globe, thought to constitute a deterritorialized global condition. Circulation in the globalization discourse is thus associated with a set of rather vague analytical notions of transience, such as flows, fluidity, intensity, extensity and velocity (Scholte 2005). Embedded in this shift of focus lies the essentially liberal idea of circulation as the setting loose of natural forces of human activity through political deregulation, especially the erasure of 'unnatural' political constraints on markets. Circulation in the anthropology of exchange cen-

tred on the moments of transaction and was regarded as integrating society and reproducing social order and hierarchy. The usage of circulation in the broad field of social scientific analysis of the globalized world predominantly seems to denote disruption, disembedding and disassociation of people, objects and capital from their social and territorial contexts.

In her influential article on 'the global situation', Anna Tsing directs our attention to the charisma of globalism, seductively engendering imaginations of 'interconnection, travel, and sudden transformation', but leaving much of the institutional and material foundations of a world of flows unexamined (2000: 330). An emphasis on the transience of circulation easily lends itself to ignoring infrastructure and imagining friction-free social, economic and political projects through the unleashed power of movement and flow. Tsing's call to also scrutinize 'hidden relations of production' and 'channel making' in the context of globalization (2000: 337) is an important counterweight to this tendency, exemplified for example by attending to the material forms that allow the trafficking of things and people (Larkin 2013). Circulation is things in motion, but also the infrastructural framework facilitating, or obstructing that motion.

Traveling along circuits through shifting social contexts also impacts the object in question. A special issue in *Cultural Anthropology* (2002) devoted to the topic of 'Value in Circulation' argues that 'value must be understood from a *circulatory* perspective' (italics in the original, Eiss & Pedersen 2002: 286). The volume contains theoretical and empirical explorations of the notion of value as a shifting dimension of objects in motion. However, as circulation primarily comes to denote a mode of tracing 'the continual metamorphoses of value in diverse social contexts' (Eiss & Pedersen 2002: 286), the transformative role of circulation itself is somewhat downplayed. Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma, on the other hand, give circulation a greater theoretical gravity (2002). Their notion of a 'culture of circulation' echoes Tsing's approach when they state that 'more than simply the movement of people, ideas, and commodities...circulation is a cultural process' (Lee & LiPuma 2002: 192). Their point is that circulation of people, capital, commodities and media messages in a global world do things to the societies and the markets they circulate through, performatively reconstituting them (Lee & LiPuma 2002:192-195). While this perspective is useful for understanding how the infrastructure of the second-hand market is recreated through circulation it has less to say about how circulation is constitutive of the objects themselves. Circulation acts performatively – 'extrovertly' – on the social contexts they circle through, as is argued by Lee and LiPuma, but it also reconfigures the inherently mutable object of circulation, acting 'introvertly'[5].

The following text is inspired by a wish to continue the long anthropological inquiry into how circulation of things create and negotiate sociality, and to examine how such processes can be understood within the context of modern capitalist society. Doing this, we build on the contributions already made for example with

respect to material culture and consumption (e.g. Miller 1987; 1998; 2008) and global travel of commodities (e.g. Foster 2006, 2008a; 2008b). However, these contributions primarily operate with objects that may or may not change as they circulate, encountering and becoming embedded within new contexts. The distinctive aspect of the field of second-hand practices is that it concerns objects that are defined by their continued circulation – objects-in-motion. Applying perspectives from classic anthropology we also take up Tsing's call for a theoretical interest in the pathways and passage-points between nodes in circuits, as much as the nodes themselves. Following Lee and LiPuma in regarding circulation as a generative process that entails negotiation at the nodes as well as the performative channel making that enables flows, our focus in the following is on how circulation reconfigures the objects in motion.

Returning to the field of second-hand consumption and practices, we wish to develop our thinking about what kinds of objects figure on this market, and how their peculiar forms of production and reconfiguration draw on circulatory practices. Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff were the first to break away from the previous focus on the actual exchanges to study objects not as things being traded, gifted or sacrificed, but as 'things-in-motion' (Appadurai 1986: 5). They thereby detached themselves from the human-centred perspective of exchange-focused anthropology and suggested that objects, with their social life (Appadurai 1986) and cultural biographies (Kopytoff 1986), actually are somewhat similar to human beings.[6]

The view of objects as shifting through different use- and value regimes during their life history has inspired a number of different approaches to material culture across the social sciences. Within consumption studies, Kopytoff's term singularization has been used to describe the process whereby commodities are ascribed personal meaning through social embedding (Miller 1987; Epp & Price 2010)**.**[7] In the field of waste and disposal studies, various contributions explore the social and cultural processes involved when a thing ceases to be of any value and moves into the category of the discarded, but also how it may reverse an expected process of aging and find new life in novel contexts of consumption (e.g. Hetherington 2004; Gregson 2007; Straw 2010; Gregson, Crang, Ahamed, Akhtar & Ferdous 2010)**.**[8] Within the field of second-hand studies, the most comprehensive study of how commodities acquire distinct values due to their circulation in different regimes of value in space and time is the contribution by Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe (2003). Using empirical data from the United Kingdom, they show how the circuits of value that second-hand commodities move through are non-linear and unpredictable, with **'**the potential at least to question, if not undermine, those conceptualizations of commodity value to be found in conventional retail environment**'** (ibid.: 142).

Even though Kopytoff's idea of things having cultural biographies have proved immensely influential and fruitful, and has sensitised scholars to the variable and

socially embedded nature of the value and meaning of objects through their different life phases, more work needs to be done in terms of theorising the process through which the thing becomes transformed by its trajectories. As has been pointed out (Graeber 2001: 33; Foster 2006: 292), Kopytoff's and Appadurai's attention to how objects shift between different value regimes – much like Eiss and Pedersen's focus on how value is transformed through shifting contexts, discussed above – is useful primarily as method. It encourages us to track things through shifting social contexts rather than simply establishing criteria for the commodity as a thing, but leaves largely untheorised precisely how this history produces the value of the object. Why should the circulation of a thing, through different contexts, enhance its value?

Another question raised in the accounts by Appadurai and Kopytoff concerns the agential capacities of the objects in motion. In their accounts, objects tend to remain passive, being shaped by the events they encounter, accumulating history and forming biographies. As has been pointed out by Amber Epp and Linda Price in their study of household objects within an American family, Kopytoff fails to directly theorise the role of object agency (2010: 882). While Epp and Price primarily explore the agency of a household object from an actor-network theory perspective, as **'**granted by its place and history in a network**'** (ibid.: 832), we follow a different route in theorising how circulation produces agential capacities within the object itself.[9] Before presenting this argument, however, we will outline some observations of a more empirical kind.

Keeping Things Moving

> And yesterday's junk is tomorrow's heirloom.
>
> Arjun Appadurai 2006: 15

From having been associated with poverty and low status, the trade with secondhand goods, as distinct from authorised and institutionalised market for antiques, has recently undergone fundamental changes around the world (Norris 2010, 2012; Franklin 2011; Fredriksson 2013). In the Global North, objects are increasingly marketed and consumed as 'things with a past' in the expanding sector of retro shops, flea markets and upmarket vintage boutiques. The rapid growth of information technology has enabled Internet-based trade and auction sites, as well as instant formation of groups, networks and communities through various forms of social media, creating 'a boundless marketplace for connecting pre-owned or secondary goods from where they are not wanted to somewhere or someone where they are' (Botsman & Rogers 2010: 27).[10] Such technological infrastructure has created an increasing number of surfaces between people and things, and have facilitated and sped up the setting in motion of objects through different contexts and constellations. In addition, a growing range of other, more traditional spaces

function similarly as conduits for used material culture, organised with various levels of formality. In the Swedish context, there has been an upsurge in interest in informal clothes swapping days as well as car boot sales. In the countryside, a common sight is signs announcing flea markets that have sprung up in addition to the more traditional rural auctions. Some cities arrange mega flea markets, one example being what is advertised as the biggest flea market in Sweden, since 2013 held in the stronghold of commerce in Gothenburg, a congress centre. Around municipal recycling stations, containers for used clothes have been gradually added to the regular range of recycling bins for cardboard, plastic, metal and glass, and operate in a similar manner, although on a slower timescale. Mainstream first cycle shops offer rebates for customers bringing in their used items, particularly within the electronic and clothing sectors, but examples are emerging within other sectors too. Finally, the traditional charity and second-hand shops have not only increased in numbers, but have also tended to move into prime locations in urban centres (cf. Straw 2010), where retro- and vintage boutiques can be found next to shops selling newly produced reproductions in retro-style. Taken together, these technologies, channels, containers and venues offer a formidable, and growing, infrastructure for the swapping, reuse and recycling of vast quantities of material culture. On a global scale, asymmetrical flows of used items, particularly clothes, are implicated in trade paths and networks that involve countries and regions, a rapidly growing economic sector (Tranberg Hansen 2000; Norris 2010; Alexander & Reno 2012).

How, then, can we make sense of the flows of things moving between homes and second-hand venues? From a practical point of view, the circulation of stuff offers solutions to a number of contemporary dilemmas. The sheer amount of goods produced in global commodity chains based on outsourcing and subcontracting, and consumed at an increasingly rapid pace in the Global North, causes increasing concerns for its management. A comparison between contemporary catalogues from the furniture store IKEA with those of the 1960s shows that the section focusing on storage furniture has significantly increased (Löfgren 2012: 115). Private renting of external storage space has rapidly increased in the last five years, a tendency that attests to the growing amount of things that needs to be handled within private homes (Lastovicka & Fernandez 2005; Cheetham 2009; Brace-Govan & Binay 2010; Arnold 2013; Czarniawska & Löfgren 2012, 2013; Türe 2014). According to Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, the increased consumption of mass-produced commodities is closely linked to the emergence of a specific consumer subjectivity predicated on rapidly shifting tastes and trends (2007). While stuff accumulates in cupboards, garages and attics, consumerism works by ‘shortening the time distance between the sprouting and the fading of desire’ in the subject, requiring regular visits to the market place in order for new commodities to be obtained (ibid.: 21). Against this background, it is not surprising that various practices related to second-hand exchange, reuse and sharing have

emerged as increasingly significant social phenomena in the last few years (Botsman & Rogers 2010; Alexander & Reno 2012). Clothes or tools 'libraries', clothes swapping days, car pools or kitchen interiors for rent from furniture chain stores are all examples of practices which enable continued access to and right of usage of things, but which reduce or circumvent the challenges and inconveniences of ownership. Second-hand use and exchange can be regarded as social practices similarly facilitating access to things while minimizing the trappings of long-term ownership. On the one hand, donating to charity or selling things through Internet barter and trading serves the need for de-cluttering and creating space for the inflow of new purchases. On the other hand, buying second-hand, as opposed to newly produced commodities, enables access to new (albeit used) goods in forms of consumption that, generally, require less capital (Ekström, Gustafsson, Hjelmgren & Salomonson 2012). The lesser financial investment required also means that consumption of second-hand objects may involve a quicker turnover of purchases, allowing spontaneous acts of shopping and the indulgence of temporary and fleeting fads and interests (ibid.; Liimatainen 2014:62).

Yet, the popularity of second-hand, vintage and retro that can be witnessed in the empirical studies presented in this issue (see in particular Debary, Fischer, Handberg and Hansson and Brembeck) cannot be explained solely in terms of how the circulation of used material culture enables handling the 'overflow' of commodities generated by capitalism (Gregson, Metcalf & Crewe 2007, Czarniawska & Löfgren 2012), or allows inexpensive access to such items. In order to understand the distinctive appeals associated with this market, we need to explore more complex ways in which circulation comes into play, shaping desires and aspirations as it acts on objects and subjects as a generative force.

The Narrative Sociality of Second-hand Practices

> [T]he temporary ownership allows [the receiver] to draw a great deal of renown, to exhibit his article, to tell how he obtained it, and to plan to whom he is going to give it. And all this forms one of the favourite subjects of tribal conversation and gossip, in which the feats and the glory in Kula of chiefs or commoners are constantly discussed and rediscussed.
>
> Bronislaw Malinowski 1920: 100.

Second-hand things offer a narrative richness that becomes a currency in the wider social environment in different ways. At one end, circulating second-hand things constitute frequent topics of conversation in the social networks people are already involved in. Previous studies on second-hand practices have drawn attention to how, besides being motivated by pragmatic needs or economic necessity, this form of consumption often involve particular enjoyment and pleasures, such as the thrill of the hunt, and the joy of unexpected finds (Gregson & Crewe 2003, Ottosson 2008; Guit & Roux 2010), which then become topics in social exchang-

es of different kinds. Internet-based trade and barter involve similar experiences, such as the thrill of 'clicking' a bid at an auction in the final seconds before its close (Fredriksson 2010). Private sales via Internet sites are often richly socially embedded, involving verbal or written exchanges regarding the quality and history of the thing being sold, sometimes involving personal anecdotes as well as meetings between buyer and seller (ibid.). While different in character, various forms of second-hand exchange thus have in common that they typically involve irregular and unpredictable qualities that are less common in first cycle shopping experiences. Such qualities lend themselves particularly well to stories and recounting, which may partly be motivated by a wish to display one's ability to be a 'clever consumer' (Gregson & Crewe, 2003: 11, see also Fischer, this issue).

Our pilot study showed how socially embedded knowledge about specific second-hand objects were frequent in various printed media, notably lifestyle magazines featuring articles about home decoration or fashion. A common example were owners describing their second-hand finds by actively drawing attention to their history, such as 'The stove was designed by SJ [Swedish Rail] during the war, intended to heat rail cars in case of an invasion, and found on the Internet' (Wennberg 2012: 116) or anecdotal information about how they acquired them: 'The baby chair was picked up in the garbage room after a tip-off from the neighbour' (Wrede 2012:120). It is noteworthy that items bought second-hand often retain the generic label 'second-hand' long after the purchase, a tendency that could be observed in such magazines. This suggests that the second-hand object (as well as the related Swedish term *loppisfynd*, flea market find) has emerged as a distinct category, different from objects in circulation that have been obtained through inheritance and gifting.

At the other end, new communities are emerging around the circulation of used things. Circulating objects pass through dense social contexts where layers of events, memories and meanings motivate people to interact, narrate stories and form relationships. Clothes swapping events where exchange is based on first establishing social relations of mutual recognition is an example of this (Albinsson & Perera 2009). In Sweden, clothes swapping has become so frequent that a web page has been established gathering information about clothes-swapping events throughout the country (Klädbytardag 2015). Our pilot study also showed a vast number of new groups and communities forming around second-hand-related activities in various social media, notably blogs and through the mobile application Instagram (cf. Wiman 2014). The latter, organised around photographic images that are uploaded and supplemented with text, is particularly well suited as a medium for communicating about second-hand consumption. Typically, second-hand objects, photographed in a still-life manner arrangement in private homes, are displayed along with stories about how they were acquired, where they are from, dreams of what to do with them in the future, or simply feelings or thoughts that

they evoke. Occasionally they simultaneously serve as advertisements for private sales of the items in question.

In other words, while the narrative potential and sociality of second-hand practices can be related to the ambience, characteristics and practices of the shopping experiences, it also seems to be triggered by the things themselves. When interviewing a shop owner in Gothenburg, he described how he places an old wooden sledge from the first half of the twentieth century outside his shop front in the winter season. Asked why he did this, he responded that the sledge 'makes people stop and talk'; about similar sledges that they suddenly remembered, or about how its old-fashioned steering mechanisms might work. Another example is a blog by a woman writing about the joy of encountering an old rocking chair in a charity shop: 'It was as if it was standing there, looking up bashfully at us. Somewhat ashamed of its ugly fabric, but at the same time rather proud of the fact that its cushion was worn-down and well used' (Secondhandguide.se).

We also noticed how within the Swedish context, many retailers foreground the qualities and properties of used and second-hand things described above as part of marketing and sale strategies. Previous literature has focused on how certain categories of retailers have emulated the commerce of mainstream shops by mystifying or downplaying the fact that much of what is for sale is the rejected and discarded stuff from other people or institutions. Typically, in such shops, a few contemporary-looking items are on display in the shop windows, while traces and reminders of previous owners and phases of use are carefully hidden or removed (Crewe, Gregson & Brooks 2003; Gregson & Crewe 2003:77, Straw 2010: 199). However, rather than downplaying the circuits and trajectories of the things for sale second hand, certain Swedish traders and retailers, from private entrepreneurs to non-profit organisations, draw attention to precisely the 'second-handedness' of the objects – where they come from, whom previous owners might have been, where they might end up in the future.

A window in a charity second-hand shop, Gothenburg. The sign translates: 'Share with others! Granny's waffle iron wants to find a new home'.

Instead of being selected for their contemporary 'new' look, or, in the case of the more specialist vintage- and retro stores, for their intrinsic qualities or specific collectors' value (cf. Straw 2010: 199), items on display are presented in playful and creative mixes where the used and worn 'second-hand look' is deliberately emphasised.[11] The itineraries, as much as the objects themselves, are foregrounded and serve as inspiration for the presentation and organising of stock. A suggestive example comes from a Swedish jeans company. Their downtown Gothenburg store mainly sells newly produced jeans but is situated in an area particularly rich in second-hand shops. In 2013, the shop display included both used jeans, deemed to be particularly attractively worn, hung on the walls as decoration, as well as a few used jeans for sale, equipped with tags detailing information about their previous owner[12]. In a similar example from a British initiative, customers in charity shops could listen to recordings of narratives about individual pieces of clothing and their previous biographies as they browsed through the shop by scanning QR codes attached to the items. The stories had been collected by asking donators to answer questions such as: Who used to own the item? Where was it acquired? What memories does it bring back and why is it being sold? The charity chain reported an increase in fifty percent in sales in relation to this one-off event, which was tried in two stores (de Jode, Barthel, Rogers, Karpovich, Hudson-Smigh, Quigely, & Speed 2012. See also Lovatt, this thematic issue).

Another example is an initiative by Swedish company, entitled 'swapstories'. Under the slogan of 'Let your old Haglöfs products live on', used branded pieces of clothing are handed in to the store in return for a discount, and then sold again along with information about its previous owner and use, with all profits going to charity (Haglöfs 2014). In this way the company seeks to enrich the brand through drawing on values created by the circulation of the used items. While the cases above concern clothes, there are also examples of how such retail strategies are used in the trade of used objects, such as the shop in Haga, a historical district of Gothenburg, which sells home decoration trinkets and are gathering information about the objects' histories to present on their blog and Instagram account (Fåfängans Antik 2015).

The above testifies to a growing interest in how used things are socially and historically embedded. How, then, can we make sense of this interest? More specifically, how can we theorise the value-creating process of circulating second-hand objects? In order to explore the nature of objects growing in motion, we will first revisit anthropological debates on value in relation to gift and commodities and examine how second-hand objects come to embody 'gift qualities'.

Gifts, Commodities and the Hybrid Second-hand Thing

Within anthropology, there is a long tradition of conceptually separating two main forms of exchange of objects, that of gifts and that of commodities, each thought

to follow its own logic (Gregory 1982; Appadurai 1986: 3-16; Graeber 2001: 23-47; Tsing 2013).

While problematic, as discussed below, this classic dichotomy contains some key insights that can help us conceptualise the kinds of dynamics involved when used things circulate on second-hand markets. Drawing on such theory we suggest that second-hand objects constitute a specific type of thing, which differs from the traditional categories of commodities, gifts, sacrifices, or art objects, and which requires its own theoretical and analytical apparatus. The following sketches out the contours of such an argument.

Various anthropological approaches have built on the Marxian idea that the social complexities of relations, labour and skills are veiled in the practices of valuing, marketing and trading commodities. Things become commodities by being divested of their history and context, and exchanged for other things, or more commonly for money. The gift, on the other hand, as Mauss (1950/1990) and later generations of anthropologists have argued, derives its value and purpose from the social entanglements that it carries and initiates. Gift objects, as embodiments or extensions of persons, are transacted to mediate social relations. To reduce a long conversation to its core, there has been a tendency in anthropology, best exemplified by Chris Gregory (1982: 41), to counterpoise the thing form as the sovereign substance of the commodity economy with the person form as the sovereign substance of the gift economy.

In the last few decades, scholars have highlighted how such a dichotomisation is problematic, since the two types of objects often blur into each other. Rather than seeing them as opposed, Appadurai for example, points out that 'commodity' is a phase in the social life of an object, defined by its exchangeability, and not a specific type of thing (1986: 13). He highlights how everything has a 'commodity potential' that can be initiated as it shifts in and out of various social contexts and value regimes (ibid.). Geertz, similarly, criticises rigid dichotomies of social gifts and calculative commodities, showing that the scarcity and unreliability of information in 'the bazaar economy' fosters commodity exchange that is thoroughly dependent on developing and maintaining patron-client type of social relations since that is the only way for a consumer to 'determin[e] the realities of the particular case' (1978: 31). At the other end, the calculative dimension of gifts has been explored by Pierre Bourdieu, who reinvigorated the classic insights of Mauss by adding the temporal dimension to gift exchanges (1977). He showed that not only are gifts entrenched in social obligations, but to be socially effective they were also exposed to the calculative skills of tempo and timing. Lastly, and of specific interest to the subject being dealt with here, Tsing has recently shown how capitalism relentlessly renews itself by incorporating what she calls gift aspects – 'all objects of exchange in which parts of the giver are embedded, extending social relations beyond the transaction' – into the creation of commodities and the making of new markets (2013: 23). Taking the example of global production

of Matsutake mushrooms, she shows how social relations, including non-human social relations, form a crucial part in creating this particular form of exclusive mushrooms as a commodity. Significantly, however, these aspects are subsequently 'forgotten' in sorting and assessment work 'designed to block gift-like social relations' (ibid.). This is of interest in the context of how second-hand objects achieve their social and commercial meaningfulness, a process which is similar to those outlined by Tsing, and Geertz in his example of the bazaar economy. The difference, however, lies in how the value of second-hand objects is dependent on procedures of remembering, rather than of techniques of forgetting, something we will explore below.

First cycle commodities are, ideally, disembedded from the production process and the people involved in it, drawing only on the relationships to other commodities on the market place for their value. They typically enable a solitary and unrestricted object-subject-relationship between the thing and the owner. In contrast, second-hand objects are defined by having a prior history. Like gifts, they are already to some extent embedded into social networks, and implicate their buyers in a potentially more open and porous form of ownership than that of first cycle commodities. Acquiring their defining characteristics through their prior circulation and social entanglement, they form a hybrid category, combining elements of both the commodity form and the gift form. Whereas 'pure' commodities are contingent on techniques of social forgetting and veiling (commodity fetishism), second-hand objects, like gifts, are dependent on energies of social remembering and disclosure. In other words, how the social history and cultural biography of the object is remembered may affect not only its value, but transform its ontological status, as will be explored below.

Making and Growing Things

> The vaygu'a – the Kula valuables – in one of their aspects are overgrown objects of use
>
> Bronislaw Malinowski 1922: 90

> ...objects are not what they were made to be but what they have become.
>
> Nicholas Thomas 1991: 4

In Malinowski's functionalist approach, 'overgrown' denotes qualities of the circulating Kula objects that make them 'too well decorated and too clumsy for use' (ibid.: 89). For our purposes, however, the concept of growth is a suggestive entryway into thinking about the nature of second-hand objects. This is inspired by Annette Weiner's dynamic and processual view of the inalienability of objects as an animating property defined by their 'cumulative identity with a particular series of owners through time' (Weiner 1992: 32-33), and seeing 'materialisation [as] an ongoing lived process' (Bell & Geismar 2009: 4). We suggest, however,

that this processual aspect does not necessarily result in a symbolic density of objects causing slower circulation and eventually leading to 'keeping', as suggested by Weiner (1993), but rather, along with Ferry (2002), that commodities may retain inalienable aspects while circulating.

A fruitful theoretical framework for exploring the dynamics involved when prior phases of circulation become a source of value of an object can be found in recent writings on the difference between 'growing' and 'making' (Ingold & Hallam 2014).[13] According to Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam, 'making' typically describes a process in which something is deliberately created out of other things. The constitutive parts that are to be assembled each have their prior history (for example, the raw materials come from somewhere), but the process of making has a distinct beginning as it starts, and an ending when the making is finished and the object has achieved its new status. Making thus embodies the same kind of dynamics as the traditional rites of passage, which transforms a thing or person from one status to another through ritual disembedding and reembedding (ibid. 2014:4). 'Growing', in contrast, is a continuous and evolving process, taking place in ways and forms of everyday life that are largely unnoticed. If making starts with a number of parts to be assembled to form an object, growth departures from internal forces that are then dependent on the complex interweaving with forces that are external to the thing.

Applied to the field of second-hand consumption, this perspective brings out an interesting difference between first and second cycle commodities. A typical artefact commodity is made by assembling parts into a whole designed for a specific purpose. This making is a process of interventions with a distinct beginning and end, and, in contemporary society, is often rationalized and standardized through an effective and streamlined industrial production apparatus. The making of the object ends with the 'forgetting' of all the social labour that went into the production and it being placed on the store shelf. Thereafter a different process commences, in which the objects is bought, used and starts aging. However, rather than simply 'consumed', in the sense of being devoured or destroyed, many goods in fact enter an intensely productive phase during which the object is actively embedded in everyday contexts of use, becoming entangled in various social relationships and practices (Douglas & Isherwood 1979; Miller 1987; 1998; 2008; Hoskins 1998; Epp & Price 2010).

While consumption and aging in a linear perspective is understood as a devaluating process of wear, decay and breakage, from an alternative perspective this can be seen as a process governed by a different regime of value in which the object undergoes a second productive phase more akin to growing, gradually accumulating qualities, and changing into something different. Like the growth of a plant or a fruit, this process of transformation is governed by forces that are internal to the object (intrinsic qualities in terms of design, character, material affordances and responses to its handling and the passage of time) as well as exter-

nal (social, physical and affective entanglements and constellations), together constituting a process of becoming and forming a continuously evolving whole. Since time and aging is how the second-hand object accumulates events and histories through which it slowly transforms, this process shares yet another characteristic of growing, in distinction to making. As Ingold and Hallam point out, the process is not reversible (2014: 7).

The example of an aged second-hand chair might illustrate this. The process of making the chair is likely to have had a clearly defined beginning and end. Once assembled, it would be possible, theoretically, to reverse much of the process of making it in the sense that it can be unmade, and once again become separate pieces of wood, plugs, leather, nails or whatever materials it was made out of. As the chair ages, however, it becomes affected by the events it lives through. Qualities intrinsic to the chair – the way in which the wood darkens and yields to or resists scratches and bumps, its specific design and artistic expression, the stiffening or softening of the leather, its degree of comfort, to name a few – interacts with social, cultural and affective contexts and orientations towards it, such as memories attached to it or historical shifts in preferred styles and trends, forming an accumulating whole that is more than its parts. In other words, just like with the growth of a plant, factors both internal and external to it co-produce its ontological status at any stage in its aging, whether as 'second-hand', 'antique', 'kitsch' or 'rubbish'. Regardless of what the particular outcome of this growing may be throughout its different stages, it is not possible to ungrow the qualities of the aging chair in the way that one can unmake the parts that make up a newly made chair. It can be restored and redesigned, but it cannot shed its status as used.

The metaphor of growing also highlights a distinction between the phenomenon of provenance, in which verified information about the history of an object raises its commercial value according to relatively set criteria and expectations (Feigenbaum & Reist 2013), and the ways that things are appreciated because they are 'second-hand'. The praxis of attaching formal provenance to a treasured object can be regarded an extension of the paradigm of making, since it continues to make the object beyond the moment of its initial completion. The function of provenance is to continue to assemble the object and thereby raise its value. Only the most outstanding objects are endowed with provenance, and only certain kinds of attributes are noted as verified facts of the object's history (cf. Appadurai 1986 and Kopytoff 1986). These specific types of used objects – art works, craft or museum objects – are continuously being assembled by an authorized apparatus of institutions, experts, methods, criteria and knowledge. This 'apparatus of provenance' has been formed over a long period of time and is an established form of recognizing history as having aesthetic, artistic and economic value. In contrast, used objects with no formal provenance attached to them can only rely on how their growth is socially sensed, recognized and valued. While formal provenance can be likened to 'thin' scientific knowledge, the recognition of the growth of

used objects can be compared with how anthropologists adopt the analytical strategy of 'thick description' to go beyond factual accounts in order to capture the complex layers of meanings and interpretations, of details and contexts, of social relations and affective states (Geertz 1973). Much like thick description is aimed at grasping social life in denser textures of contexts and interpretations, we can think of second-hand objects as being 'thickly inscribed' by the layers of histories, events and relationships they come into contact with.

Above we saw examples of how an old sledge 'stopped people in the street', while a rocking chair was both 'bashful' and 'proud' of its history. These comments draw attention to a specific dimension of the 'grown' character of used and second-hand things, namely their agency. In discussing art objects, Alfred Gell suggests that such objects embody a mediated form of agency, originating with the artist's intent to influence peoples' emotions, actions and thoughts (1998: 16-24, see also Hoskins 2006). In contrast to art objects, a significant factor of second-hand things is often not how they are creatively made, but rather their process of becoming through growth. Although originally assembled with specific human intention, their second-hand character is produced through subsequent phases of growing, involving interior as well as exterior forces. As described above, their agential capacities partly reside in their intrinsic qualities, exerting influence on what happens to them. However, such capacities also result from, and may be enhanced precisely by the particular trajectory of the thing. Originally, as newly assembled, an object may have blended into its contemporary context, but after having circulated, it may stand out as anachronic, quaint, old-fashioned, different because of its aging and transformation, but also by virtue of its sheer existence within a different context. The circulating object thus has the capacity to connect distant places and times, and make present layers of accumulated histories, events and memories. Similar to the art objects discussed by Gell, they are social agents, endowed with the agency to influence and affect those who engage with them. Rather than involving any human intention however, it is often the unintentional and even unexpected survival or endurance of a thing that enhances such agential capacities.

When 'thickly inscribed' objects are sold on second-hand markets, this is not simply a matter of an exchange of objectified commodities, but transactions that, as we saw above, often involve recognition of their history and sociality. Mauss, discussing the gift, referred to how residuals of the giver always remain in the object; the gift is in this respect inalienable from the giver. It cannot shed its sociality, but is partly constituted by its existence within a web of reciprocal relations (Mauss 1950/1990). Clearly, second-hand things are not inalienable in the same direct way that a gift might be, given that the purchase of it is settled with money rather than in terms of reciprocal social bonds. It can be said to retain inalienable qualities, however, in so far as it is regarded not as a pure commodity, but rather as an object defined and valued in terms of its prior 'growth' and sociality.

An exchange of photographs and stories taking place after an Internet sale, Gothenburg One the left, a picture depicting two armchairs in their new home, taken by the woman who just bought them. Since the seller had told her how he had grown up with the chairs, she sent him the picture. He responded by sending her a photograph of himself as a boy, playing in front of one of the chairs in its original fabric (right). Photographs contributed by Maria Sandström (left) Janne Olsson (right) during our pilot study.

The object's status as used may be appreciated in terms of detailed and specific knowledge akin to that of the provenance of art and collectors' items; it may be sensed as more of a generic 'pastness', as 'having a history', regardless of what this history might be; or the appreciation may be formed from a third position, appropriating aspects of both. A 'thick description reading' of the object would entail provenance type facts and elements of generic 'pastness', but also wider and finer contextualizations of the object's actual and fictional social and historical embeddedness. These forms of appreciations are likely to blend into each other. Even when having precise, factual knowledge of the biographic details of an object, such information is likely to be perceived through a more generalised notion of a given era, place, or type of object, involving imagination and fantasy. Conversely, if the specific information is missing, and guesswork and imagination provides a replacement history, this is likely to contain elements informed by actual knowledge of similar classes of items.

How the accumulated growth of a particular object will be perceived and evaluated is an empirical question. In certain contexts, marks and signs of previous histories may increase the appreciation of the thing, while in other contexts the

same traces may do the opposite. Previous literature has discussed how bodily traces of previous owners typically are regarded as problematic and something that should be removed, such as stains and smells (Fredriksson 1996: 37; Gregson & Crewe 2003: ch. 6; Ottosson 2008: 96). To increase their attractiveness, objects with such traces often require extensive divestment and cleansing rituals (Lastovicka & Fernandez 2005). If appropriately distant, however, either from the body, or for example through temporal remoteness, such traces may play less of a negative role (Gregson & Crewe 2003:171). One could surmise that with the increasing interest in the 'second-handedness' of used things discussed above, and the observation that consumers in affluent countries increasingly cultivate an 'authentic corporeality' against the sterile commodifying logic of the mass market (Binkley 2009: 106), the notion of traces of previous owners as repulsive and threatening may be weakening, at least among certain groups of consumers (cf. Ekström et al. 2012). Again, on a speculative note, the widespread popularity of second-hand trade and barter on the Internet, which, as discussed above, often enables a detailed and socially embedded knowledge about items being sold, particularly in sales between individuals, might have contributed to stimulating a more general interest in such information.

To think of use as growing continues the line of thinking, beginning with Appadurai and Kopytoff, of 'persons and things... not [as] radically distinct categories' (Appadurai 2006: 15). On the one hand, this perspective decentres dominant understandings of objects as primarily made by assembling (or through the attachment of provenance), by capturing how they are reconfigured through circulation, acquiring thick layers of inscriptions through their growth. On the other, it complements more general theories of things as being in a state of perpetual becoming, due to how their material properties interact with their surroundings (Ingold 2007, cf. Gregson & Crang 2010: 1030). While the latter insight applies to most artefacts, the above discussion is an attempt to capture how a particular form of becoming results in the creation of specific kinds of objects that are increasingly assuming the status of sought-after commodities.

Conclusion

This article has argued that recent interest in second-hand practices and objects in post-industrial societies in the Global North is related to the particular significance and value attached to things that have a history. Differing from the kinds of objects traditionally considered by anthropologists, second-hand things form a hybrid category, combining the commodity and the gift form, as opposed to a commodity purified of its sociality. This is due to how they become transformed by their circulation, understood here as a continuous process of evolution or growth, including shifts through different social contexts. Developing the notion by Appadurai and Kopytoff that objects have a cultural biography, we have been

inspired by the distinction between 'making' and 'growing', and theorise how such biographies transform the thing, or '…how form, rather than being applied to the material, is emergent within the field of human relations.' (Ingold & Hallam 2014: 5). Unlike provenance, which captures a 'thin' verified history of the object, thus continuing the 'making' of it, phases of growing transforms the object, which becomes 'thickly inscribed' with layers of history. Such thickly inscribed objects-in-motion affect subjects in particular ways, engendering narrative richness and sociality, and inviting considerations not just of past histories of the thing, but also of its present and future trajectories. Once on the market place, it is often the thick inscriptions of its prior circulation and social entanglement that become its primary source of value. This can be contrasted with the disembedded and solitary object-subject-relationship that characterises first cycle commodities.

While this article has sketched out some explorative perspectives on circulation as an analytical tool within the specific field of second-hand things, one can note that the broader topic of circulation deserves further attention. The analytical and theoretical affordances of the concept of circulation need to be refined and clarified. The handling of second-hand objects is a promising arena for further developing the notion of circulation and its generative capacities. Another fruitful area of research concerns the recent popularity of the term in contemporary society. Circulatory ideals and practice play an increasingly important role across a number of different social fields, reflected in discourses on circular economies and circular strategies for sustainability, from waste recycling to emerging sharing cultures and sustainable consumption. Notions of circularity seem 'good to think with' and operate as powerful idioms, promising solutions to a range of pressing social issues. From the need to de-clutter over-filled homes, while keeping consumption levels intact, to challenges of social inequalities and environmental degradation, circulation seems to offer solutions. It also interlocks with powerful moral conceptions of fitness in an ever changing world, where not only objects are in motion, but also subjects, who should never embrace anything firmly, but be prepared to swiftly engage in and disengage from social and material constellations (cf. Bauman 1998/ 2005:25). Associated with modern Enlightenment ideas of movement, change, progress and freedom, circulation is also related to non-modern forms of societal organization in which things and people are thoroughly embedded in time and place by the rationalities of connections, returns and reuses. Perhaps the current interest in circulation, and circulating things, rests on precisely the elasticity of the term, with its capacity to conjure up modern hopes and fantasies of change and progress by reawakening non-modern sensibilities of reuse, return and reappearance.

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Notes

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[2] The focus is on the circulation of used objects within a market setting, even if the phenomenon extends beyond the market, including circulation that does not involve economic compensation. As noted in the Introduction of this thematic issue, global waste circuits, largely invisible to consumers in affluent countries, underpin and make possible some of the processes of circulation that take place within second-hand contexts in the Global North, and which are in focus in the following discussion (cf.Tranberg Hansen 2000; Gregson & Crang 2010; Norris 2010). While important as contexts for the processes dicussed here, such global flows are not primarily in focus in this article.

[3] These perspectives are further explored within the research project 'Re:heritage. Circulation and Marketization of Things with History', funded by the Swedish Research Council 2014-2017.

[4] As pointed out subsequently by Annette Weiner, however, Malinowski misunderstood aspects of the Kula, failing to realise the central role played by women as well as by valuables other than those made of shell in the generation of sociality (1976).

[5] Within the Melanesian context, Nicholas Thomas takes a similar view, discussing how objects are transformed by their movement in a colonial setting (1991: 7-34).

[6] While early anthropologists were thing-focused in the sense that ethnographic objects played a central role in the exploration of other cultures (Bell & Geismar: 2009), their theorising of objects rested on the idea that things are stable and passive entities attributed meaning to by persons in social interactions and transactions.

[7] However, in its original use, the term denoted that which was held out of commercial circulation because of its unique and irreplaceable values (Kopytoff 1986).

[8] While predating Kopytoff, Michael Thompson's work on rubbish theory is another influential contribution (1979).
[9] According to Law and Mol, actor-network theory struggles to account for how objects become transformed by circulation, since its main focus is on how configurations are stabilised and retain their shape even while travelling ('immutable mobiles'), rather than exploring how objects change as they travel between contexts (2001: 611).
[10] E.g. 'Ontheflea', an application for mobile telephones, created in 2013, which enables instant and free advertisements created by taking a photograph of the item to be sold (www.ontheflea.se/app/).
[11] Creatively mixing old and new is a well-explored theme in studies of second hand consumption, particularly in relation to fashion (e.g. Gregson & Crewe 2003, Fredriksson 2013). Here we wish to draw attention not to the mixing per se, but to the foregrounding of the used character of the goods.
[12] We are grateful to Niklas Hansson for sharing this observation, as well as that concerning Fåfängan, see below.
[13] Ingold and Hallam are careful to point out that they do not view making and growing as opposing processes, but prefer to explore the 'making in growing' and the 'growing in making' (2014: 3).

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