

## Book Review: My Life with Things: The Consumer Diaries by Elizabeth Chin

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*My Life With Things: The Consumer Diaries* by Elizabeth Chin, 2016. Duke University Press.

[My Life with Things](#) is an engaging, quirky, auto-ethnography detailing key moments of Elizabeth Chin's life, focusing especially on her passionate relationship with commodities and processes of consumption (from shopping in thrift stores and on eBay through to her obsessions with home decoration). Narratives and diaries written over several years present Chin's anxieties, desires, and needs as they emerge in relation to shopping for clothes, for her home, and for her daughter. These are interspersed with a tracking of the personal and familial relationships of Karl Marx. The central argument, that the personal is political, that materiality matters, and that political economy is a sensorium of lived experience as well as a systemic process of the book builds upon Peter Stallybrass' beautiful essay, *Marx's Coat* (1998). Stallybrass tracks Marx's writing of *Das Capital* through his relationship with his overcoat, which he repeatedly had to pawn during times of hardship (barring him from entry into the British Library, his de facto office and writing space). Chin effects a parallelism through her own account of her obsession with her kitchen knobs, scarves, and thrift stores. She links her own miscarriage (and the shopping frenzy it precipitated) to the Marx' family serial loss of children, and her own upbringing to the Marx's precarity and financial hardship. Both sets of personal accounts are bookended by deft, although hardly new, summaries of trajectories of thinking about commodity fetishism, alienation, transitional objects, the aura of mass produced consumables, and the trope of auto-ethnography. The book finishes with a wild and free account of the hoarding, tango dancing activities of a "fictional" Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ who eventually disappears, wraith-like into a museum collection, which itself becomes animated, dancing away from the confines of storage and exhibition.

Chin is a good writer and her willingness to expose herself here is engaging. Her candid accounts of how much she earns, miscarrying a baby in Ikea, displacing her anorexia onto shopping, and projecting her family insecurities onto antique carpets are compelling, albeit in perhaps a voyeuristic way - I read the book as I would a bedtime novel. However, her candid positioning of her own class identities, for instance in her presentation of her anxieties about employing a house-cleaner, don't succeed in much more than making us uncomfortable on her behalf. Even without the kind of hindsight we now have for the Marx's life and work, it is hard to see Chin as engaged in a scholarly project in which she draws from her experiences to develop a better understanding of the world and the economic and political systems she inhabits. Nor do the vignettes about Karl, Jenny, and Eleanor Marx really do much for developing a critical pathway through her own complex psycho-dramas. Maybe it's enough to re-centre the everyday practices of

anthropologists and other scholars as part of the social theory they/we inhabit - but Chin's centering of her personal experiences works in a rather unanthropological way - we aren't really able to move through the personal into the political, from Chin's local to anything more. This is particularly troublesome in the vignettes that focus on Haiti in which her acknowledgment of the economic and political inequalities that inevitably underpin her research makes us yearn for her to reposition herself, at least through the opening up of this account to some other voices. Instead she falls out terribly with her Haitian fieldwork-family when they come to stay with her in California, their relationship unable to survive outside of the paternalistic and unequal structure of anthropological research away from home.

There is a marvelous trajectory for experimental ethnography in which a number of prominent female anthropologists have been working to develop alternative writing styles with which to deal with contemporary culture and geopolitics in which we are all implicated. Anna Tsing, like Chin, draws on her Asian-American ethnicity and deploys a deceptively simply, on occasion poetic, writing style in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. However, unlike in *My Life with Things* the consumption stories Tsing tracks for Matsutake enable us to understand and critically engage with global capitalism by the deliberate centering of an alternative vantage point (which Tsing herself inhabits through her research). Kathleen Stewart's book, *Ordinary Affects* also uses the auto-ethnographic and a similarly evocative writing strategy to expose some of the abjections, and alienations, of contemporary American culture, although Stewart is as self-effacing as Chin is self-promoting, referring to herself in the third person throughout the book. If *Ordinary Affects* is, as one goodreads reviewer describes, "[social theory for poets](#)", *My Life with Things* is basically pulp fiction. It is however testament to Chin's engaging style that found myself quite disappointed that she received no response from Revlon after uploading several Haiku and other poems to one of their new nail polishes on their customer feedback website - I would have thought that kind of crowd-sourced fan-lit would have been exactly what their social media campaign would have liked:

### *Love Letter Number 3*

I'm never complete

But with finished copper nails

At least I look done (Chin 2016: )

## Reference:

Stallybrass P. 1998, 'Marx's Coat', in *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Places*. Ed Patricia Spyer (Routledge, London) pp 183 - 207