

The Purse: Carrying Around My Private World

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Abstract

The purse is an object so ordinary and everyday that it is unlikely to have elicited much thought or reflection. Nevertheless, its capacity to extend the domestic into the foreign and provide a private space in public mark it as unique. In this paper, inspired by Heidegger's jug, I examine the particularities of the purse and reflect on its unique meanings as a carrier of a private world.

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It sits in the front hallway on the floor next to the door leading out of my house waiting for me to take it along when I leave. If it is there then I too am home—my purse is part my life exterior to my home. With a single movement – right hand grasping and lifting—the purse is on my shoulder and absorbed into my out-of-the-house-body as I lock the front door. From that moment, my purse shifts from a familiar object cluttering my front entry hall to a secure and steady weight against my shoulder, and a light bounce against my hip. In my purse I carry with me the items I require for my day-to-day life: money so I can buy groceries, a phone to call my partner, and keys so I can re-enter my house. Also inside are the things I anticipate needing for events planned or imagined: a re-useable bag for impromptu shopping trips, a small bottle of water, and a snack just in case.

And yet, when I visit my parents in the countryside my purse is tossed onto the couch or a chair in the bedroom not to be thought of until I depart for the city again. It does not accompany me when I take a walk in the woods, visit my sister down the lane, or go to the lake to catch fish. Still, I would not dream of leaving my purse behind in the city where I live. What if I need something? My purse is so much part of my away from home body-self, that on an evening out, and I have left it at home, I may catch myself, stomach dropping out, conscious of the missing weight, searching for it with my hand before I recall that I chose to leave it behind.

My purse does not so much *do* anything beyond allowing me to organize and carry more items than would be possible with my two hands. It does not directly extend my capacities in the world in the way a pen or a hairbrush might do—with a pen I can transform a blank page and with a brush tend to my messy hair. Instead, my purse allows me to carry with me other things, objects that I use and that in turn alter my relation with the exterior world. That I can carry my purse on

my shoulder, it falling between my arm and chest, is not insignificant; this seems one more layer of closing, securing my purse and the items within it from the outside world.

My purse is made of cloth and leather stitched together in such a way as to create a large opening beyond which is an enclosed empty space. The material itself, the colour for example, may matter little to the functionality of my purse although it does mark this purse as mine conveying information about who I am to the world. The opening of my purse is also a closing, a zipper transforming it from three-sided receptacle to a four-sided enclosure inviting me to store things inside. These are not just any things, they are particular in their size and value; my tennis racket is too large and my favourite pair of earrings too small just to toss inside. My purse is not simply a bag with a vast empty space. There are pockets in and on my purse—this one is just perfect for my mobile phone and that one holds my notebook and pen in just the right way, allowing me to reach for these things without so much as a glance.

When I am shopping for a new purse it is not only important that I like the look, feel and size but also that it *fits* my life; will my things find their place and be, as I need them, ready-to-hand? Before making my final decision I may even pull out all of the paper giving the yet to be purchased purse its form and carefully place all of my belongings inside. I then perhaps sling it over my shoulder, feeling its weight, checking myself in the full-length mirror and decide if this is the purse for me. That a purse becomes *my* purse seems more than a result of purchase or it carrying my belongings. I may own a purse and use it with a few attempts but never feel it is quite “mine”. Some purses than others seem more incline to become mine in the interior space they enclose, in their exterior expressions, or in their way of corresponding with and extending my body.

The dictionary definition of a purse is “a small, flat pouch fastened with a zip, clasp, or press stud, esp. as carried by a woman” (“Purse”, 2016). Unlike a bag, which is a “receptacle . . . closed on all sides except the top” (“Bag”, 2016), a purse is not only a bag, but a bag perhaps with more security feature, carried by certain population, and with a more specific purpose. Although historically a purse was used to hold coins, in contemporary life it is a way to carry valuables beyond money—identification, credit cards, and a favourite lipstick are things typically stored inside. In a bag, one may toss any old thing as long as it fits: groceries, an extra sweater, or a wet towel after a day at the beach; but in a purse one may only find specific things that belong. These things may be valuable as well as personal even private. In this way, my purse carries my secrets. Others may not dare go inside. The contents of my purse seem to warrant only the most cursory of glances at the security check at an outdoor festival I attend. The guards use their eyes to survey the contexts quickly, as if the things inside are at the same time incapable of causing harm and too dark or forbidden to linger upon.

My purse has a thick, comfortable strap that fits across my chest. The strap is just the right length to rest comfortably on a single shoulder leaving my hands free and the purse protected within the fold between my body and my arm. My wallet or my suitcase can also help me to carry things along when I am outside, but they have no straps and therefore require me to use my hands. By comparison, a purse is also known as a handbag; it is indeed a bag that is ready-to-hand, extending the carrying capacity of my two. Whereas a purse goes with me everywhere, there are places where a grocery bag, a suitcase, or backpack is not welcome; at the theatre or museum, these items are generally checked or left behind. In the cabin of an airplane, at the restaurant table, and in the movie theatre my purse sits nearby on my lap or over the shoulder of my chair—no one would question its presence in even the most intimate places. Purses are welcome in bedrooms, boardrooms, and bathroom stalls. They sit in the front seat of a car, under the seat on a plane, and

securely in a person's lap. Although a person may offer to help lift my bags into an overhead bin or carry them from my car no one would dream of doing the same with a purse regardless of its size. There is something intimate and private about a purse and its contents rendering them off bounds to anyone but the owner. To rifle through another's purse is a violation and if it were stolen it is more than that monetary value of the contents that are lost.

There is space for my wallet within the confines of my purse. I arrange it and pull the zipper quickly. Everything is now safe inside! From whom or what exactly am I keeping my things closed away? I do not want the items in my purse to fall out and get lost in the fold of the seat on the bus. Yet, there seems to be more to it than that. The contents of my purse are precious and they are personal. Of course, there is a wallet, a phone, and keys; these are items you would most likely find in any purse. But there is also my inhaler to treat my asthma, a book to read on my commute, and a scarf in case I feel cold. Although I want these items with me when I am out and about I do not necessarily want others to know the contents of my purse. When I am out my purse offers me a small space of my own, a private dwelling for my things, and a home away from home of sorts. In this way the inside of the purse is a liminal space that both represents the domestic and the 'outside' world.

A purse may be deemed a status symbol, a display of particular forms of gender (for example, hetero-normative womanliness¹), and also a means to an end (that is, a way of carrying). That I take a vintage clutch with me to the opera and a large leather satchel to the grocery store is significant. Owning and using these particular purses, switching between them at my discretion, marks me as belonging to a culture, time period, gender-orientation, and social class. I would be read differently if I carried a couture handbag and bedazzled clutch and so on in an almost infinitely list of possibilities.

In the meantime, carrying a purse may be a symbol of my adulthood. As a child, I had no need for one (although that says nothing of desire). Perhaps many small children have once adopted mum's castaway purse as their own and which baby has not tossed and chewed their way through the contents of this sacred bag. Nevertheless, if as a child I ever required anything surely my mum or dad would be able to provide. Now however, I become the one who takes care of others as well as myself. When I walk with my niece and she falls and scrapes her knee, it is me who reaches into the front pocket of my purse to produce a tissue to dry her tears and clean her wound. For many people, the shift from child to adolescent to early adulthood may be accompanied by the transition from schoolbag to backpack to purse. Although all of these are used to carry along the things needed for the day, they are different. A schoolbag is for a child, only distinguishable from a backpack in its specificity, often marked by its design, colour, and size. Both a schoolbag and backpack can be carried on the back, having at least two straps, one for each shoulder and a large enclosed section with an opening at the top so items can be stowed inside. To access the contents of a backpack or schoolbag the bag must be at least partially removed from its position, thus making its contents less ready-to-hand than those stored within a purse and yet more readily available to others since they are exposed rather than enclosed by my body. Passing the security at the security, my friend's backpack may have to undergo an investigation. Packed lunch and blanket pulled out, main bag and side pocket checked, it seems a backpack is considered not a carrier of privacy but a potentially dangerous tool box that is subject to publicity.

Recently my purse has changed again. It is a cold winter morning and I am heading out for one of the first times with my newly expanded family. We get out of the car and my father-in-law reaches for the diaper bag. I stop him immediately, almost instinctively with a, "no, no I've got that," quickly slinging it over my shoulder. My hands are full and I am not sure why I've declined

his help. It was only after this happened several times that I realized it was not just a diaper bag stuffed to the brim with baby stuff. Although it is not dissimilar in appearance and size to other totes I have owned, the contents are unique for this period of my life—inside there is a change pad, several diapers, and a small toy. In this bag, however, is also my wallet, lip-gloss and hand cream; they have migrated over and found their new places within its confines. The two have merged into one—this is a diaper bag *and* a purse; my past and present shift and merge marking my transition from adult woman to mother of a young child. There are still things I need and want to have along with me that are solely for myself but I also must consider the comfort of a baby for whom I now care. To some extent the baby stuff is also my stuff and my purse, after I become a mother, has a motherly transformation. In this way, my purse carries and will continue to carry my care, needs, and worries of self and others for the day while conveying aspects of my identity to the world.

Note

1. This phenomenological exploration of the purse could have taken many forms. For the purpose of this short reflection on “the thing” in the Heideggerian tradition (1971), I choose not to delve deeply into the gendered nature of the purse and experiences thereof, however, I acknowledge the purse as a highly gendered ‘thing’ that would lend itself to an analysis from this perspective.

References

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