



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

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The weight of things: Object-oriented mania, citational hoarding and critical-mess literature

Abstract:

This creativecritical essay investigates the author’s object-oriented mania and her anticipatory relationship to “happy objects” (Ahmed, 2010) through the lens of her obsessive-compulsive disorder, shadowed by memories around inheritance, a family propensity toward hoarding and the empty promise of capitalism under a “regime of crisis ordinariness” (Berlant, 2011). The chaos of the hoard, in which objects congeal rather than circulate, suspends the hoard in a time outside of time, similar to Kristeva’s (1982) chora (Lepselter, 2011). While the hoarder as artist manifests a “poetics of accumulation” (Falkoff, 2021), a writer as hoarder amasses a citational hoard via reference manager. This essay applies Zinman and Reese’s “critical-mess theory” (qtd. in Singer, 2001) to creative writing, arguing that critical mess literature demands a collaged form where one might draw conclusions from patterns made evident by the accumulated, intertextual, polyvocal hoard. It poses citations managers as a modern tool of Lévi-Strauss’s (2021) *bricoleur*. In “stringing up a narrative” of things (Juckes, 2017), the author puts word-things into place through object recollection, curation and citation, forming an interweb of narrative objects to demonstrate the application of critical mess theory with and through life writing.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Creativecritical, bricolage, objects, hoarding, chora

We need the weight of the world we fear. We're selfie-obsessed or hoarding. Or we're all about mindfulness and hardened against those who fail.

– Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart (2019, p. 22)

Aspirational realism and domestic avalanches

I have a complicated relationship with things. Objects that I have desired have promised me happiness, the illusion of happiness, a sense of upward mobility – but at what cost? In the early noughties I bought sparkly shoes and designer purses, symbols of a fashionable, successful life that was completely out of touch with my actual daily struggle to stay grounded on this spinning planet. As my credit card debt bloated, flashy name brands promised fame-by-association, proximity to wealth, entrance to some superior echelon of clones bearing Dior handbags. I had to rent out my body to pay for these things, a temporary vocation that demanded an ever-increasing investment in a plasticised self: silicon tits, gelled nails, hair extensions of ethically dubious origins. Even now, loosely ensconced in store-brand mum clothes, I feel the siren call of trends shaped by magazines I no longer read.

In my twenties my debt closed in on six figures – some of it mine, and some of it belonging to my small retail business, which specialised in pretty little nothings that I sometimes swiped for personal use – as I made increasingly questionable decisions to pay the compounding interest. Even as bankruptcy loomed, I scoured off-price stores and discount racks for runway trends without cause to wear them, as my life contained neither the glamour nor social capital of the catwalk model. I bought more and more, thinking that if I just bought the *right* garment, the *right* stilettos, everything in my life would be okay. Rebecca Falkoff (2021) notes oniomania – having a compulsive need to buy things – as precursor to hoarding. As a shopaholic I was just as bad as the other hoarders in my family, just as blind to my object-oriented mania, as much at risk of setting my life on fire. Lauren Berlant (2011) charges the sort of conspicuous consumption that engulfed me with assuring “satisfaction in substitution”, a scenario that paradoxically perpetuates dissatisfaction “because all objects are rest stops amid the process of remaining unsatisfied that counts for being alive under capitalism” (p. 42). Hoarding is a fantasy that braces one against the threat of reality such that it “*seems* like a better aspirational realism” (Berlant, 2011, p. 42). My reality wasn't working for me (see: list of mental health diagnoses), and so I leant into unreality.

In *Real Estate* (2021), Deborah Levy confronts her own compulsive spending, confessing that the objects in her London flat could fill at least three more homes: “Lamps, rugs, curtains, chairs, a copper fondue pot I had picked up in a flea market in Paris, bed linen, mirrors” (p. 178). This overflow of superfluous objects served as staging ground, a rough draft for a future life to be lived. My own collections reflected a similar phantasmagorical promise. The contents of my storage unit, twelve-thousand-plus kilometres away, represent a life I *could* have lived had I not run away from California to New Zealand and then Australia, and then found that I had not managed to escape myself at all.

*

My great-grandfather was a pioneer ham radio operator who broadcast under the call sign W6AM. Without funds to save his Rhombic Ranch from developers, my uncle sought to preserve the value of W6AM's historical relics for an unknown future, as shrine to the detritus of things past. With waning interest in the amassed hoard of electrical components, once useful when W6AM served as chief radio operator during US president Woodrow Wilson's term, his metal miscellanea rusted within disintegrating cardboard boxes. My uncle had no room to wedge the cables, circuit breakers and antennae within the narrow channels of his apartment, between stacks of newspapers, magazines, receipts, file folders, Victoria's Secret catalogues, CDs, VHS cassettes, tape players, junk recovered from alleyways, crates of bargain books, empty pizza boxes, bread crusts, bags of peanuts, partially filled water bottles, expired vitamins, medicines prescribed to other family members, unpartnered shoes, damaged sports equipment, musical instruments, garbage bags filled with clothes, travel mementos and myriad other uncatalogued, forgotten things. My great-grandfather's outdated technologies overflowed from my uncle's apartment onto the unkempt patio below. Objects once useful devolved into valueless tangles of wires and whatsits: evidence of obsolescence and decay, further deteriorated by exposure.

In the nineties, my grandparents hired me to clear winding goat paths through my uncle's office and "domestic avalanche" (Falkoff, 2021, p. xiv) to shrink the height of the junk towers before they caved in or caught fire. I banished the W6AM radio equipment and many of my uncle's nameless things to the refuse pile, along with a clutter of black widow spiders. (My cousin Chris was bitten by a spider when attempting to fulfil the same mission.) I'd spend weeks at a time earning five bucks an hour – eight later on – simultaneously satisfying my organisational compulsion and alleviating my grandparents' fears, only to see the spaces I had uncovered invaded by my uncle's next round of scavenging. He was like Charlie Brown's friend Linus, trailing a perpetual dirt cloud, but made of stuff. There was no such thing as a clean surface: every blank slate existed for him as canvas to be filled.

"Make sure you don't dump anything in the alley," Cousin Chris warned, "because that's the first place he'll check."

He'd always check. Make recoveries.

I'd drive to the edge of North Long Beach in search of unlocked dumpsters where I'd unload the debris of my uncle's overwhelming "collections" without fear of repossession.

A poetics of accumulation

Hoarding disorder was included in the *Diagnostic and statistic manual of mental disorders* in 2013, which defines it as a "persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value" (p. 264). Diagnosis hinges upon the difficulty with discarding resulting in "clinically significant distress or impairment" in important areas of functioning (p.

277). Hoarding is less concerned with the accumulation of objects than the hoarder's misrecognition of the objects' worth, and to what degree the hoard interferes with everyday life. Ultimately, the division between hoarding and collecting involves personal taste. Where a collector's urge to collect might be as compulsive as the hoarder's need to hoard, diagnosis takes the form of an aesthetic judgment, where the hoard is "an aesthetic object produced by a clash in perspectives about the meaning or value of objects", and the hoarder is an artist whose identity is a function of the hoard as artefact (Falkoff, 2021, p. 6). Where Falkoff presents a "poetics of accumulation" (p. 25) as the mode of the hoarder-as-artist, theorist Jane Bennett (2011) proposes that hoarders share an affinity with artists "in their exquisite sensitivity to the somatic effectivity of objects" (2011, 15.11).

In considering Walter Benjamin's notion of the true collection as a *magic encyclopaedia* with occult properties, Michael Taussig (2011) muses on how items gravitate into a collector's hands by chance – the reverse inscription of fate – and might therefore "be used as an instrument of divination" (p. 104). The same might be said for the chance encounters that fuel a hoard's growth – Bennett (2011) observes how hoarders tend to speak of a hoard's auto-accumulation. These items represent what could be, as much as what used to be. Economics come into play as the pathological hoarder accumulates a postconsumer hoard that is worthless beyond their overflowing home: one person's trash, another's treasure. As a "mental disorder of irrational economic choices" in an economy of increasingly cheap consumer goods (Falkoff, 2021, p. 7), hoarding is symptomatic of late-capitalist production, as natural resources dwindle and wealth disparity grows. Hoarding counteracts scarcity by suspending objects "in a bounded space of potential" (p. 12).

Daniel Jukes (2017) picks up on the tendency for objects to constellate as "very real flecks of space" and time, tethering us to the past (p. 501). He suggests that the "time-rotting quality" of things extends to writing – where words and things are the same – and that we might make sense of a world which evades sense-making "by stringing up a narrative, by lining up things" (p. 501). This is what I am doing as I excavate my own relationship to objects and my family's inclination to hoard: I am putting word-things into place, accounting for my own narrative and re-contextualising my past as I life-write my future anew. I layer text upon text, memory-object upon memory-object, threading autoethnography with critical writing and literary theory in such a way that my obsessive-compulsive disorder influences my methodology. I lean into this tendency to amass and sort, letting themes and feelings and technologies of writing dictate modes of organisation, of sedimentation.

As I sort my memories into essay form alongside literary criticism and theory I risk burying my voice in layers of polyvocality, but I trust the citational fragments to storytell. "Who needs a long narrative arc anyway, when fragments have their own subjective affordances?" asks Stephen Muecke, who lumps long narratives in with categories like Wall Street investments and literary monuments; these he sweeps aside for "flashes like in the fire opals from Lightning Ridge" (qtd. in Berlant & Stewart, 2019, p. 154), emergent concepts and feelings whose value is in their evanescence. There is a weightlessness and dexterity to this stringing together of narrative flashes that belies, and gives credence to, the weight of the textual hoard.

A hoard on fire and a Google diagnosis

Some people hoard to stave off waste, others hold onto objects for memories signified, some can't pass up a bargain and still others hoard in the event of apocalypse. Falkoff (2021) sorts hoarders' reasoning into three temporal categories: sentimental hoarding is rooted in the object's past, aesthetic hoarding values the object in the present and instrumental hoarding sees value in the object's future. My uncle, who prized his hoard for past, present and future purposes, was unable at any stage to perceive that he was possessed by his possessions. Every item to him was priceless, irreplaceable, a treasure among treasures. Any other point of view, including that of the incense that ignited a blazing fire in his bedroom, saw his overcrowded apartment as a flammable post-consumer rubbish heap. Bennett's monograph *Vibrant Matter* (2010) highlights the productive agency of things: *thing-power* is "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (p. 6). Where hoarder and hoard imprint each upon the other as "permeable and aggregate bodies" (Bennett, 2011, 27.07), the hoard is less possession than an extension of self.

After his apartment caught fire, and after my grandparents' double-mortgaged property that he lived on was sold – and maybe even now – my uncle would spend almost his entire pay on storing things. He was one of Storco's big spenders, leasing several double and triple-sized storage sheds to safekeep his hoard. (Writing – these surplus words – is my failsafe; publication guarantees my perpetuity.) When my uncle had no money left over for actual rent, he moved in with his new girlfriend to his ex-girlfriend's house, which contained a hoard of its own. I think of it as a marriage of inconvenience between one hoard and another, two hoards which formed their own destructive ecosystem. When Cousin Chris needed to find my uncle but knew only the general neighbourhood he had moved to, he used Google Earth to pinpoint the backyard with the most junk.

Happy objects for a future-sense self

The signs of my object-oriented mania were evident early on. I had collected as far back as I can remember: plastic charm bracelets, porcelain cat figurines, stickers, pencils, My Little Ponies, Barbies, and then, later, fashion spreads, shoes and clothing. When I was ten or twelve I sang Disney's "Part of Your World" at my school talent show, playing the part of the Little Mermaid. It was a prescient performance, an homage to things, as I lamented my *gadgets and gizmos aplenty*, my *whose-its and what's-its galore* –, and in the face of this cavern of stuff I still wanted *more*. I could not see that the *more* that I wanted was not material, could not be purchased, and so I spent my midnights organising my treasure trove into drawers and boxes. Everything had to be just right before I could sleep. My clothes hung a certain way, on specific hangers and in a particular order. My porcelain cats stood to attention. My unsharpened pencils faced the same direction. Everything was accounted for even if it meant forgoing sleep.

Once everything was *just so*, I'd scale the drawers in my closet to reach the upper storage cupboard so that if someone broke into our home I would be safe in my hidey hole. I couldn't shake the psychological terror of my nightmares, in which someone always wanted to hurt me. Asserting control over things gave me a sense of control over my life and lessened my anxiety

around death in the face of my mother's first bout with stage-four cancer. Even now, I take respite in habitual practices of re-organisation, losing track of time, unconsciously tapping out by rearranging stuff, words. This is my happy place, a quasi-meditative space I inhabit when I tire of freight-train thoughts.

Like my uncle, I have sought joy in nearness to things. Sara Ahmed (2010) theorises happiness as “an orientation toward the objects we come into contact with” (p. 24). In directing ourselves toward objects or using objects as pointers to direct ourselves toward future happiness, we aim for “a happiness that is presumed to follow” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 26). I've always felt more comfortable in a future projection of self, guided by the things I accumulate as markers of personhood. I curate my possessions for a future-tense iteration of self whose happiness outshines this husk of a person who cannot follow the sloganised Buddhist injunction to *be here now* without a torrential cascade of thoughts. I am endlessly impatient with myself, with others, for I sense the time will come when my object-hoard will deliver on the promise of happiness, and I cannot wait for this future-oriented emotional unburdening. Ahmed notes how our emotional attachments lead to an “anticipatory causality”, with object and affect bound together as “feeling-cause” (2010, p. 28). Just as my uncle saw potential for contentment in each of his accumulated objects, which ultimately became kindling for an apartment fire, I saw each of my purchases as conduit to a better life, regardless of financial ruin.

Bennett (2011) notes hyperconsumptive practices and ever-shortening consumer cycles which necessitate junking as *antimaterial*, in that it “conceals the vitality of matter” (p. 5). While on an aesthetic level I wouldn't have been diagnosed with hoarding disorder, shopping was my gateway drug. I modelled put-together-ness in cut-price designer goods, a polished front which belied my economic instability. Conversely, my uncle's material chaos was visible marker of his disarray. His outsides matched his insides, while I assumed a mask. While our respective mental unhealth likely stemmed from shared genetics, we exhibited our object-oriented manias in different ways: visually, his hoard was less pleasing. We were each equally attached to our things, but I judged my assets greater than his, more refined. Surely. Anyone else could see that we were both possessed by the things that we claimed to possess, which likely meant we had no taste at all. In considering the relationship between taste and happy objects, Ahmed (2010) brings Kantian ethics into play: “Pure taste becomes disinterested” and is an argument for regulated desire (p. 34). Ahmed quotes Aristotle on the portrait of the man [*sic*] of moral character, who

neither takes pleasure in the things which delight the vicious man, and in fact rather dislikes them, nor at all in improper objects; nor to any great degree in any object of the class; nor is he pained at their absence; nor does he desire them; or, if he does, only in moderation, and neither more than he ought, nor at improper times, and so forth. (2010, p. 37)

According to Aristotle's teachings, my uncle's and my gross attachment to things places us firmly outside the bounds of the tasteful, the moral and the good. We have mistaken feeling good for goodness. (Happy) objects for happiness.

A lineage of storage units, a question of inheritance and a theory of things

Three generations of my family rented units at Storco simultaneously. After my great-grandmother died in 1993, I helped my mother fold the contents of her storage unit into her own. Before Mother's death in 2008, we merged that remaining unit, including her boxes of journals, photographs and creative writing, into mine. Each of these compoundings required curation and a cull. The things that we chose to hold onto were a way to define ourselves through objects hoarded or inherited. Grief, nostalgia and the constraints of space all dictated what would survive the hands of time. The enduring objects are infused with memory: each holds the potential to provoke life-writing, each bears an origin story. Somewhere in my storage unit there are handwritten letters collected by my great-grandmother, antique hats stiffened with mercury, and her 1920s swimwear collection, which I had hoped to copy and remake in modern fabrics back when clothes ruled my world. There is Great-grandpa's one-page manifesto on how to live a long life. Eat watermelon seeds, drink red wine and what else? There are items from my childhood that Mother begged me not to throw away: my 1990 American Girl Doll, Kerstin, and her collection of accoutrements, plus a box full of Barbies. There are wedding presents, including China and silver, from my parents' failed 1976 marriage. There's Mother's Bolex camera and her homemade 1960s Super 8 films, including *Chairlift eight*, which features actors chasing a vibrator down the ski fields; and *White bread*, where a man who looks like a westernised version of Jesus (my uncle, when he had long hair?) forces a loaf of Wonderbread down his throat as a warning against the excesses of capitalism. This subversive mother – not the woman I knew her as, the sexless columnist of *Golf living* and *Tee it up* magazines – is the one I long to meet.

Also in storage: a broken chandelier that takes up a small casket-sized volume of space, which mocks me. It once hung in Grandma's dining room and speaks to a fancier life I pictured for myself, a life that I could never afford. Susan Stewart (1992) describes the function of heirloom objects as being to narrate the "significance of blood relation at the expense of a larger view of history and causality" (p. 137). In this Waterford crystal I discern a history of putting on airs, which compels me to interrogate what I have inherited. John Frow writes that "the true role of Things ... is to be the mirror of our souls" (p. 273) and so I might see myself reflected in the artefacts that belonged to my mother, her mother and her mother's mother. I see my refracted visage alongside a warning that objects in the mirror are closer than they appear. I seek truth and overlap between the lives of these matriarchs and the person I have come to be, but there is an unsurmountable gap between the aspirational possessions suited to the women two- and three-generations removed, and the object-stories of struggle common to my mother's life and mine. What do these hoarded objects tell me about our lives? At some point in history, we took a wrong turn. Or maybe I just came to see the great divide between my grandmother's insistence that her granddaughters behave like royalty and my mother's paycheque-to-paycheque living as teacher and sole parent. I felt betrayed by my grandmother's admonition to luxe living, the call to privilege that belonged to historicity (or never!), the insinuations around purity and defilement. From all of this posturing I would rebel, becoming what she would call a fallen woman, a temptress, a harlot. My grandmother told me I could become

president and instead I traded my body for cash. Still I claimed for myself the chandelier that I will never hang. It's rather boudoir after all.

Heirlooms, artefacts, object: my storage unit is full of them and I find it difficult to part with any particular *thing* that triggers recollections. But how does one differentiate a *thing* from the other? Bennett (2010) notes how *objects* appear as *things* in an assemblage (or hoard): “vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them” (p. 5). Bill Brown (2001) presents *thing theory* as oxymoron, where the word *things* is used as placeholder for both the particular as well as the ambiguous: it “hover[s] over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable” (p. 5). *Give me that thingamajig*, we say, pointing to a discrete item. *What's happening?* someone asks. *Oh, things*. Perhaps the inarticulate nature of a *thing* devolved into uselessness enhances its narrative potential. An object becomes a thing, according to Brown, when the usefulness of an object degrades. When its former usefulness is no longer apparent, *thingness* asserts itself – the materiality of the formerly useful object intrudes. What once served a purpose now bears a history – here we might take on the role of object doula and speculate. My favourite thing I have inherited is a box of buttons: more than just fasteners fallen from shirts and dresses, each ellipse tells a story of being lost and found.

Much like the broken chandelier, there was nothing logical about my uncle's amassed hoard, despite his considerable powers of reason. The paradox of the hoard – a category “beyond the grid of intelligibility” (Brown, 2001, p. 5) – is that the hoarder sees value and meaning in their surplus. By clinging to the belief that the hoard adds to rather than diminishes quality of life, the hoarder subverts the diagnostic criteria of the *DSM-5*. Where everyone else sees a house on fire, inflamed by a glut of stuff, the hoarder – my uncle – blames only the Nag Champa incense, as if the object acted upon were the real villain. The hoard hovers in a temporal wasteland of that-which-once-had-a-purpose, whose role is fetishised (or charred) relic of a time before. As my uncle mourned the incineration of his things, the rest of us traded *I told you so's*, ignoring the weight of our own object-oriented manias, which mostly paled in comparison to his hoard-on-fire. My aunt who is estranged from me – compulsive shopper and uncontrollable collector of things – was the most gleeful of all. She hired a two-ton dumpster and led a small clean-up army to dispose of my uncle's half-burnt things, without ever contemplating her own propensity to hoard-grow. My uncle, of course, interfered with my aunt's opportunistic dumpster project, ferrying loads of ashy junk to his entourage of storage cells. No lesson learned, only one thing proved: my uncle would always be slave to his stuff (and the rest of us: circus clowns).

Hoarding as capitalism's grotesque shadow

Our society is obsessed with hoarding narratives, tuning to shows like *Hoarders*, *Help! I'm a Hoarder* and *Hoarding: Buried Alive*. Susan Lepselter (2011) describes how in these shows, “the hoarder's monstrous accumulations loom with an increasingly ambivalent fascination” in the face of neoliberal capitalism and globalisation, against a background of market crashes and greed (p. 920). This makes for compelling television. The only greater irony is how many of

us watching the show are complicit as we fill up our Amazon shopping carts and respond to emails from our favourite stores, which lure us to get caught up in the frenzy: SALE ON NOW!!! CLEARANCE EVENT!!! MARCH MADNESS!!! Lepselter (2011) unpacks the paradoxical discourse around the word “consumption”, noting that it has long been associated with bodily wasting, and in the eighteenth century meant the opposite of “production”. Only in modern times is “consumption” linked to wealth, health and vitality, resonating with “the growing Eurocultural truism that the (post) modern person is a subject made with objects” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2020, pp. 3–4). We are a consumer society, primed for purchases and upgrades. Only, to be in a position to consume, we must be productive little workers, or else have ready capital which, invested, produces labour-free capital.

Many of the subjects portrayed in televised hoarding narratives operate at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, the devastation of hoarding all too obvious in their modest domiciles: things accumulated to prevent waste, objects gathered for a rainy day, *waste not want not*. Hoarding of capital is the method of the wealthy, who do not need to amass physical objects to assure themselves that they will not despair of what they need for tomorrow. The glamourisation of minimalism presupposes that the discarding consumer will be able to re-purchase whatever they have discarded at market prices. The wealthy are able to disguise their hoard beneath a veneer of cultivated, name-brand simplicity and in offshore accounts. Lepselter (2011) marks the hoard, whether financial or material, as “grotesque shadow of ordinary, unmarked commodity fetishism” (p. 921). The taboo or horror of hoarding narratives (queue scary music) is where the contaminated boundaries between accumulated objects and “unmanaged sentiment” meet (p. 925). In the uncategorisable heap of mismatched objects and affect, economic and sentimental value are confused. Relics of the pasts and objects that the hoarder envisions might one day be useful are suspended in a time outside of time. They are “congealed”, according to Lepselter, “instead of circulating in the world of flow and exchange” (p. 926). These temporally displaced objects constellate outside the regular ebb and flow of economics, which today include trading solutions such as eBay or Marketplace and its many buy-sell-trade groups which help combat disposability.

Objects as inciting incident

While I judge my uncle for letting his hoard rule his life, my life is also dictated by my objects. In July 2015, Storco issued me a thirty-day notice to vacate my storage unit. I panicked, lamenting the fate of my things. My family had rented at Storco for decades, the business wasn’t closing down, my rent was paid in advance – so what was the deal? Out of all the hundreds of units on the sprawling, concreted lot, it was my unit’s row which flooded and thus needed to be torn down in otherwise bone-dry Southern California. But I was living 12,756 kilometres away and had only days earlier discovered my unplanned pregnancy.

Surely, an act of God. Or Mother.

My bad luck would paradoxically give me breathing space to repose myself for what was to come. I did not know then that domestic violence crisis centres and intervention orders would

become my new normal. My objects needed me to save them – or I needed to save my objects – in order that they might save me. I booked a flight back to California: an expense I could hardly afford: also a lifeline. I stayed with my father for two weeks and visited my flooded unit daily, sitting on the ground in the unremitting sun with my hidden, unannounced, imperceptible bump, then returning to my father’s house to sleep on the floor while the spare bedroom remained empty.

I pre-booked delivery of a portable storage cube half the size of my unit to mitigate the ongoing expense of holding onto things. I committed to a serious purge and had to decide what was worthy of keeping, bequeathing, donating or dumping. Items of sentiment or value, impossible to part with. Mother’s writing and journals filled eight or nine storage boxes at first, but I reduced these by half by eliminating drafts. I assumed I’d see them again soon. Goodbye furniture, goodbye tchotchkes and curiosities which may have once held value or meaning, whose safe-keeping I could no longer justify.

I placed Mother’s ashes in the new storage cube, uncertain as to whether Australia would be my forever home. Everything slotted away Tetris-style into a five-by-eight-foot wooden cube, which was trucked off to an industrial park I had never visited and stored onsite for \$55 in U.S. dollars per month plus rent increases. I was about to write myself a new life.

Languaging the inchoate hoard

In “The Horror of Things” (2011), Lepselter links the chaos of the hoard to Julia Kristeva’s *chora* – “that infantile sexual space of limitless, purely material, pre-linguistic disorder” (p. 928). The object hoard might be interpreted as unlanguageable *chora*, a parental vessel or receptacle for pure potentiality. In this *chora*, nothing *is*, but anything *might* be. It is a place from which stories might eventuate. Kristeva (1982) relates *chora* to the birthing vessel, how in giving birth there is a “scorching moment of hesitation (between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death)” (p. 155) wherein the “nascent body tears itself away from the matter of maternal insides” (p. 101). I think of this hesitation – a moment of overwhelm – as it relates to the object hoard – the abjected storage container – whose latency might be organised, categorised, narrativised. A fledgling story shaped out of chaos. I think also of a writer’s *chora*, of fingers suspended above keyboard before a word has yet to arrive. The writer’s job then is to language the inchoate hoard.

The idea of *chora* traces back to Plato’s (1997) grandiose character Timaeus who, in his eponymous text, philosophised on the creation of the world. Although *khôra* means “place” or “space” in Greek, Timaeus likens it to the bearer of an imprint, a mother, container or wetnurse. It is “the thing that is to receive in itself all the elemental kinds” while being faceless, “devoid of any characteristics” (Plato, section 50e). Derrida (1995b), whose essay “*Khôra*” deconstructs the Platonic origins of the concept, writes: “One cannot even say of it that it is *neither* this *nor* that or that it is *both* this *and* that” (p. 89). The object hoard might be nothing, a bunch of crap destined for the junkyard; but also it has the potential to be everything, recomposed into source material for life-writing. I flirt with the idea of *écriture chora* as a gestational space of

potentiality, a channel through which pre-cognitive thought-objects might flow and become manifest. Maybe this is because my pregnancy is what returned me to writing. In the choric holding space or hoard the cellular impulses are pre-linguistic, inchoate, a disordered mass of creative matter not yet become word. Everything was possible, I just didn't know it yet.

Anna Gibbs (2005) elucidates the way that writing dictates itself to us by way of “dimly remembered melodies” which stem from unlocatable parts of our bodies (p. 6). Where Gibbs speaks of “the inchoate, subtle activity” of the writer’s body (2005, p. 6), I think of the incipient, prelingual nature of chora and how we might embrace this immature sensation, this chora, in the act of writing: listening for what is not yet there, what is not yet consciously felt, what can be sensed but not yet discerned. We might pay attention to what the hoard is communicating. Acknowledging that human actants are comprised of lively, self-organising matter helps us recognise our own thing-power, according to Bennett (2010), who suggests that “anticipatory readiness” (p. 5), perceptual openness and childlike naiveté permits us to attune to the vibrancy of thing-power. Gibbs (2005) notes a type of writing where “thought takes place without language” (p. 6), which is produced not just by ideas but also by affective knowledge that not only dictates the form of writing but produces the very ideas themselves. As I write into a hoard of personal object recollections and language the unlanguageable, I rely less on conscious process than affective knowledge to put object-memories into place. These objects tell me about my life as I write them, dictating the method and mode of life-writing.

Like affect, which might be separated from emotion by conscious psychic process and intelligibility, so too does chora – and the chaos of the hoard – occupy a pre-conscious, pre-cognitive sphere. An overabundance of things, while individually decipherable, might coalesce into an amorphous mass of unintelligibility. Similarly, too many narrative objects can lead to clutter, an inability to see the proverbial forest. Life writing requires craft, a systematic approach which involves listening to what is there, an inventorying and an appraising. Lepselter (2011) theorises that in the hoarder’s space, there is a feeling that “language must develop out of babble to create a dominant symbolic order from the chaos” (p. 928). The hoard-as-object develops a language of its own, a language of abjection, a dominant symbolic order out of disarray. “As opposed to *object*, or *subject*, the *abject* ... suggest[s] a bit of each *glued together*” (Taussig, 2011, p. 73). The bricoleur as life writer applies this gluey substance to a hoard of interleaved textual bricks.

As with the abjected hoard, an uninterpreted archive speaks to me of abjection. The archive “is anywhere artefacts of the past have been gathered up by humans in a more or less coordinated fashion and wait, inert, to be galvanised into new life through the magic touch of meaning and, quite likely, narrative” (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2013, pp. 11–12). In Derridean (1995a) terms, these documents are grounded in the past, their value linked to an indeterminate future when someone will have taken the time to revisit them and determine their significance through curation, organisation and citational practice. In the holding space between usefulness and to-be-usefulness, the archive is cast out of circulation, no longer valid or relevant as live document. Without archivist, archon or curator, the abjected archive becomes a hoard: a cache

or stockpile which is hidden away. As life writer, I aim to breathe new life into the archival hoard, bringing object-memories to life.

In popular hoarding narratives, hoarders are pressured to interpret their mess rationally with the help of experts who are employed “to escape the trap of chaos and bring it quite literally up to ‘code’, or the social, conventionalized meaning of language” (Lepselter, 2011, p. 928). Even as these television shows impose their profitable morality upon hoarders, coming from a family of hoarders I find truth in Lepselter’s metaphor. Where a towering onslaught of gadgets and doodads leaves little room for people to wade through the channels of their own home, the clutter is unlanguageable. One might look for common or unifying thematics between object categories, working out the patterns of accumulation in order to discern the hoarder’s underlying value system. Without a deep understanding of *why* each type of item has been collected – or “rescued”, as my uncle would say – it would be near impossible to negotiate a robust cleansing with the hoarder even for safety’s sake. Where professional organisers Joanna Teplin and Clea Shearer of *The Home Edit* (2019) or Marie Kondo (2014) with her KonMari Method™ impose their tidy “solutions” *en masse*, what is often overlooked is the life narrative which led to the accumulation. Kylie Cardell (2017) notes how the rhetoric around tidiness links together “control, curation, and narration ... and life writing is the key methodology through which this drive coalesces” (p. 501). In learning how to language or code a conglomeration of house-bound stuff, I encounter an anthropomorphism that ascribes power or memory and nostalgia to objects. I must decode the relationship between objects and self before negotiating the objects’ release. Similarly, the archivist might wade through an excess of materiality to arrive at the language, or code, of the individual archive. Every archive has its messages, which might be interpreted differently based on the positionality of the archon. Much as an organiser brings their aesthetics to the hoard, so too might archivist and curator apply their sensibilities to the archival chora, languaging the inchoate hoard.

But what happens to the private archive belonging to the deceased whose reach never went viral, whose personal effects don’t merit space in a library, museum or other special collection? Lepselter (2011) describes the fetishised hoard as consisting of “private, intimate, and idiosyncratic talismans of memory and desire” that can’t be circulated because no one wants them (p. 943); the same could be said for the personal archive. The exchange value of the archive, or the lesson of redemption in the detritus of one’s past, is derived from what might be salvaged and reinterpreted, or collaged in new ways, from an archive of personal effects otherwise destined for disposal. A life writer might accept the challenge of the personal archival hoard.

Citations manager as toolkit for the *bricoleur*-hoarder

My breath catches when I think of my scattered possessions, how I wish I could gather them all together just to whittle them down. Yet when I think about my practice of citational hoarding, I feel oxygenated. I have always struggled to retain knowledge: it leaks out of me; if I don’t write it down, it doesn’t exist. I speed read but digest slowly, placing sticky notes in texts where sentences or ideas stand out. Later, I transcribe marked passages into a citations

manager, Zotero, typing hundreds of thousands of other people's words, eschewing copy-paste. Each typed citation provokes a memory-object or chain of associations which I tag by theme or keyword, inviting these blocks of text into conversation with my autoethnographic work. Ethnography requires staying open to "the sensed social-material-aesthetic atmospherics resonant in a scene"; it is "the threshold onto worlds of expressivity in a problematics" (Berlant & Stewart, 2019, p. 34). By way of attunement to atmospherics and through woven literary conversation, my citational hoard circulates, forming a polyvocal literary economy. I interleave texts, brick by brick, attentive to the influence each makes upon the ones laid before, and of the subtle disturbances each brings to the atmosphere. This rearranging of memory-object blocks from citations managers into life writing is arguably a contemporary methodology of Claude Lévi-Strauss's (2021) *bricoleur*.

The composition of the *bricoleur*'s toolbox is "the contingent result of all the occasions that have presented themselves for renewing or enriching his [sic] stock" (Lévi-Strauss, 2021, p. 21). In "The Textility of Making" (2010), Tim Ingold argues that the bricklayer's bricks are "neither brick nor mortar" but rather materials which are to be followed, woven "into the texture of material flows" (p. 96). Ingold links the practitioner – *tekhne* in Greek – to the Sanskrit for carpenter – *taksati* – which shares the same root as the Latin verb *texere* – to weave. The *bricoleur* as artist-practitioner then is as much a tradesperson as a weaver of materials, charged not with "imposing preconceived forms on inert matter but of intervening in the fields of force and currents of material wherein forms are generated" (Ingold, 2010, p. 92). Traditionally, a writer as artist-practitioner might impose form (*morphe*) upon matter (*hyle*) according to the Aristotelian *hylomorphic* model of creation, using traditional technologies of writing including craft decisions. But Ingold calls for the creation of art *against* the hylomorphic model, where the artist-practitioner adopts the role of wanderer-wayfarer who seeks and follows the grains embedded in "the world's becoming", bending its course "to their evolving purpose" (2010, p. 92). This attentiveness to forces and flows – to weaving and binding textures or texts in a generative, responsive and ongoing movement – speaks to the relationality between materials and maker, a relationality that is not fixed but, rather, improvisatory and open-ended. Hayley Elliott-Ryan (2023b) breaks down the movements inherent to *bricolage*, proposing a non-prescriptive, non-outcomes-based set of motions which can encourage unexpected happenings in creative writing practice. Elliott-Ryan extracts from the French verb *bricole* the articles *swerving*, *straying* and *rebounding*, then adds to these a fourth motion: *hesitation*. These terms, notes Elliott-Ryan, each hint at movement that is inefficient or excessive. Rebounding is both "the frenetic motion that occurs if we do not swerve around an obstacle or stray from its trajectory" (p. 46) and "an active decision (made in a moment of hesitation) to scatter everything in the set and then bounce ... between ideas, fragments of memory retrieved from reminiscence, information and previously constructed materials" (p. 46). Much like the *bricoleur* who assembles from the materials which are at hand, Elliott-Ryan's *rebounder* practices sense-making and sentence-making with that which is to hand.

In applying Lévi-Strauss's (2021) concept of the *bricoleur* to a methodology of the accumulated, intertextual hoard, where the *bricoleur* collects elements "on the principle that

‘this could always come in handy’” (p. 21), a textual hoarder amasses citations “just in case” until a critical mass has been achieved. (Unlike a physical hoard, however, this can be easily categorised with keyword tags or via drag-and-drop filing.) Zotero and other citations managers are tools that can be seen to extend from the Renaissance practice of commonplaces. The citational-objects I have collected evidence my relationship to a text and to the many authors who have invaded my memories with their thought-objects, which at any time might degrade from sentence level to word to glyph. Each of these citations influences my life writing as I write affectively, intuitively into their scholarship, knowledges co-mingling so that my thoughts are attributable to many and also to none. I cannot know the outcome before I begin: I am at the mercy of objects and associations, caught up in a processional waltz.

The heterogeneous collection of the *bricoleur* – and the textual web of the hoarder – presents a toolset that is not specified for any one particular operation, but which might potentially become useful for any number of operations within a particular field (Lévi-Strauss, 2021). For each, Lévi-Strauss’s *bricoleur* and my textual hoarder, the possibilities are mathematically determined in part by the critical mass of the toolset or hoard. The burgeoning toolbox, accumulated through material or creative practice, constitutes a treasury of materials from which the *bricoleur*-hoarder might draw. The *bricoleur*’s first practical move, according to Lévi-Strauss, is a retrospective turning back to the constituted set, which might be evaluated or inventoried before the *bricoleur* “engage[s] in a kind of dialogue with it” to assess solutions (2021, p. 22). As a *bricoleur*-hoarder whose practice is situated in creative and life writing, I return to my critical mass of quotes and notes via my citations manager, gauging each keyword-triggered element’s relevance to my creative inquiry. I essay to attempt and assay to evaluate, enfolding citational elements into my practice, staying open to the ways they might create layers of textuality – a *lasagnification* (Munro, Murray & Taylor, 2020) perhaps, or “a polyphonic chorus of intertextuality” (Hedley, 2023, p. 16) – paying attention to what each layered element demands of the surrounding text.

Wading through the critical mess

An object can contain multitudes. A multitude of objects can tell a story. When author Kristin Keane’s mother died of a rare cancer, Keane (2022) aimed to bend time to reach her mother. She hoped to achieve the impossible by substituting *objects* for the variable w , which often represents *time* in mathematical equations. Keane corralled artefacts relating to her mother and herded them into encyclopaedic form. While she waited for her mother to emerge from the hoard of object-memories as she lined them up via life writing, she discovered that her “plan to wrangle time became past tense – the same way *us* is now” (2022, p. 110). We cannot know what we are to know without the critical mess. The hoard is what allows us to see the patterns, to discern what *is* or *is not* there. Keane ultimately returns to the variable w , which no longer simply represents *time* or *objects*, but rather a compendium of mother and self, plus imagination “and whatever space-time continuum absorbs my faith” (2022, p. 113).

“What three items would you take to a desert island?” I ask my son.

“Umm. Bumblebee Transformer, dinosaur Transformer ... and another Transformer.”

“What about your blanket?”

“I don’t want to play this game anymore!”

Editing the intertextual hoard is something like the task of organising. Janet Malcolm (1994) describes the “arduous”, “dangerous” task of housecleaning (aka narrating) in order that readers will want to linger in the word-space: the writer might throw out the wrong things, or leave “too bare a house”, getting caught up in the discarding so that nothing at all remains (p. 205). This is the task of a writer facing a cluttered page or quote bank: to wade through the critical mess. I think of Joseph Cornell’s (2000) artistry of boxes, self-contained dioramas filled with hoarded mementos and bric-a-brac, and how each box serves as distillation of the hoard: compartmentalised, surrealistic, trancelike. Each contained *mise en scène* proffers narrative possibilities via metaphoric or literal representations, reflecting upon the subjects which captured Cornell’s imagination. Mary Ann Caws places Cornell’s boxes “beyond clutter, eliminating the ‘sluggishness’ Cornell hated and preserving the intensity of the mental moment, with all its correspondent material” (2000, p. 30). I too chase my obsessions and categorise my life into tidy little boxes, almost none overlapping – here are the single mother friends, there are the writers, on the other side of the world lives my family, no lover in sight – and my creative practice involves fossicking and gathering before whittling away excess.

Whatever choice is made, cautions Lévi-Strauss, each “will entail a total reorganization of the structure, which will never be exactly the same as the one vaguely imagined” (2021, p. 22). This iterative process might call for a total rearrangement of the text, at which point new patterns will emerge: configurations that provoke additional keyword searches, integration of results and reordering of the textual collage. “Each element represents a set of relations that are both concrete and virtual” (Lévi-Strauss, 2021, p. 21). All are moveable parts, in continual flux and in dialogue with neighbouring text, open to interruption, interrogation and interlocution. Lévi-Strauss suggests that the poetry of *bricolage* emanates from the way it “speaks” with and “by means of things: recounting, through the choices it makes among limited possibilities, the character and life of its author” (2021, p. 25). Elliott-Ryan (2023a) speaks of a writer’s consciousness – or *dissonance* – which acknowledges that a text’s “constellation of events and desires” (p. 2) are inherently unstable, open to rearrangement.

The intertextuality between collected quotations and a writer’s autoethnographic notebooking, according to Taussig, allows us to “disrupt context and create new worlds” so that the world’s unconscious meets with the notebooker’s unconscious (2011, p. 103). The commonplaces I have laid out via a citations manager reflect the poetry and influences of my life, my obsessions, the objects of my desire; writing into this hoard, I allow text-objects to speak with, for and through me; and by means of craft, which is shaped by neuropsychiatrics as much by pedagogy and practice, I invite the porous relationship between citation and personal narrative to ink this page. As *bricoleur*-hoarder, I rearrange these bricks of textual relations in a way that satisfies my object-oriented compulsions, propels my curiosity and nurtures my propensity for

experimentation in an ever-evolving atmospherics. According to critic Declan Fry (2023), the deconstruction of text, as in the dissection of a manufactured object, should reveal “an intimate demonstration of craft, the know-how creation demands” (np).

A theory of critical mess

Once I was a tumbleweed, cartwheeling from one continent to another, trying to outpace my prickly shadow until my child tethered me to Naarm, grounding me. Before, my thoughts moved so fast that I couldn’t keep pace. Body exhausted, my mind raced: *There’s got to be more to life*. Now that I have found the *more*, discovering that it is less a matter of *what* and *how much* than *who with*, my son asks me things like “What even are people?” and “Why are we here?” His grasping for answers mimics what I do on the page when I essay. I seek to understand the many facets of self, to explain the *whats* and *whys*, to avoid recreating unhappy outcomes. I read literature and theory to apprehend my childhood obsessive-compulsive disorder which persists, and to reappraise the patterns of self-harm from which I finally managed to break free. Word-objects trigger memories, memories provide insight, and insight affords change. Enough things, enough objects, enough memories and together these permit me to venture into what bibliophile Michael Zinman and his book dealer friend William Reese call a theory of critical mess.

Zinman and Reese were transporting Zinman’s eight-million-USD collection of early American imprints to the Library Company of Philadelphia when Reese explained their “critical-mess theory” to Mark Singer for *The New Yorker* (2001). The pair of bibliophiles don’t begin with a hypothesis that they are trying to prove, they first gather together a large pile. Once they have achieved the critical mess, only then might they discern patterns and draw conclusions. Reese argues that one will never develop a sense of aesthetics if one only comes into contact with the finest objects – which is why a critical mess is essential to discernment. The hoard’s purpose is not for nothing – a mere spectacle of horror to be eliminated – so long as one is willing to learn from its mass.

Singer (2001) quotes Reese as saying, “People who have the greatest intuitive feel for physical objects start from a relationship with the objects and then acquire the scholarship” (p. 66). One can’t impose knowledge upon objects that have their own story to tell: one must listen and learn, staying open to the relationality of objects that emerges from hoarding, or from *bricolage* as more intentional methodology. Ingold reminds us that materiality is an illusion, that things “partake in the very processes of the world’s ongoing generation and regeneration” (2007, p. 9), that both humans and objects are “hives of activity, pulsing with the flow of materials” (2007, p. 12). Materiality breaks down into materials, and materials are relational, “caught up in the currents of the lifeworld” (2007, p. 3). All thought-objects, text-objects and memory-objects are similarly relational, neither fixed nor prescribed, prone to porousness, erotic dalliances, and flirtations along the spectrum of truth. Aesthetics and meaning might be determined by the critical mess of the hoard. A critical-mess of literature is built from hoarded narrative objects tied together through object recollections, curation and citation.

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