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With whale tooth and dry leaf: Object-led writing and teaching

Abstract:

This article examines how concepts of relationality and nonhuman agency can inform processes of writing with material objects, and the teaching of this through object-based learning. Bringing together self-reflexive and emotionally attuned approaches from life writing, the tactile and sensory focus of object-based learning, and notions of material vitality, object-led writing is a practice guided by the more-than-human. The structure for this practice is based on a class teaching creative writing with objects in a university museum, using objects from the collection. It establishes a framework for object-led writing through a set of cumulative strategies: description, feeling, knowing, time and chance. These strategies attune writers to the lively potential of objects beyond their associations with humans. They form a guide for teaching creative writing with objects as well as for experimenting with object-led writing and for understanding the potential for nonhuman life to shape and direct literary work.

Biographical note:

Vanessa Berry is writer, artist and researcher who works with autobiography, memory, place, objects and archives. Her work centres around autobiography and its formal and experimental possibilities, arising from her background in zine making and DIY literary practices. She is the author of essay collections including *Calendar* (2025), *Gentle and fierce* (2021), and *Mirror Sydney: An atlas of reflections* (2017). Vanessa is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Sydney.

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Leaf

A creative writing class is taking place in a room with high ceilings and tall windows. The room was fitted out before climate change extended summer temperatures into the once-mild weather of semester time, and with no fans or air conditioning it is uncomfortably hot. The heat has made us more than usually aware of the physicality of our surroundings: the sticky beige laminate surface of the desks, the glowing projector screen which seems to only increase the sensation of heat, the tall narrow windows through which only a gasp of a breeze flows.

In the hot classroom there is a moment of pause when a sudden movement directs everyone's attention to the window. A leaf from a plane tree, dry and brown, as big as an outstretched hand, has floated inside. The breeze that is not strong enough to cool the room has just enough force to keep the leaf aloft. The leaf hovers, suspended in the air current, before coming down to rest on the corner of one of the desks. The class watch in silence, all of us captivated by this lively nonhuman presence.

The intrusion of the leaf is a striking instance of “thing power”, the term Jane Bennett devised for “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (2010, p. 6). This power is actualised through relations, where “a thing has power by virtue of its operating *in conjunction with other things*” (2004, p. 354, emphasis in original). The interrupting leaf revealed the writing class to be more than a human interaction. It drew attention, through its vital presence, to a mesh of material, spatiotemporal, and planetary connections, including the disruptive forces of an imperilled climate, that set the conditions for the class, and our work as writers within these relations.

The class that day was on creative research methods: the practices and processes involved in working on a piece of creative writing. In other words, it is a class about extending creative practice into the world, into networks of ideas and texts, flows of affect, and encounters with physical spaces and entities. This kind of class, with its focus on process, has resonance with concepts from the new materialisms, and the notions of relationality that underlie them. Writers, the processes and practices they pursue, and the texts they produce, exist in a state of intra-action, that dynamic and “mutual entanglement” between emergent agencies, human and more-than-human, in which relationality is key (Barad 2007, p. 33).

Ontologies of relationality and nonhuman agency have the potential to inform practices of writing and the teaching of creative writing, influencing pedagogical frameworks that are “open ended, processual, and attentive to the aleatory nature of encounter” (Snaza et al., 2016, p. xxii) and attuned to an ethics of more-than-human community (Carstens, 2019, p. 143). A creative writing process informed by these frameworks recognises that “what is at the end seen to be the work of an individual creative writer is the result of a complex network of material and collective agencies” (Sabeti, 2016, p. 142). In teaching creative writing, these ideas of distributed agency can inform and inflect the kinds of object-based writing experiments which are often used in life writing/memoir, as well as object-based writing with museum collections.

In highlighting the critical influence of new materialisms in devising pedagogical practices, I also acknowledge the restrictions of this framework. Concepts foundational to the new materialisms such as relationality, interconnectedness, and the agency and vitality of the more-than-human are ideas that have long been central to Indigenous ontologies. Indigenous Studies scholars have drawn attention to the false “new” of new materialisms, when “Indigenous thinkers have been doing this work for millennia” (Hokowhitu 2020, p. 144). The positioning of these ideas as new perpetuates colonial power dynamics, in which ideas previously dismissed within the binaries of Western thought are presented as new developments (p. 132).

Scholars such as Alison Jones and Te Kawehau Hoskins acknowledge the potential of shared impulses within Indigenous Studies and the critical materialisms to work against dualisms of nature-culture and subject-object, and how they can be productively brought together. In their study of a manuscript drawing of the facial tattoo of Māori leader Hongi Hika, Jones and Kawehau Hoskins model a collaboration between materialist and Māori knowledge systems in examining objects of research. They draw on the depth and continuity of Indigenous knowledge of non-human vitality and agency, as they work with concepts such as Bennett’s “thing-power” (2016). This is one strategy that recognises the potential for synergy; other approaches foreground the importance of incommensurability when identifying connections across ontologies (Hird et al., 2022).

Informed by this conceptual background, a creative writing pedagogy shaped by ideas of relationality and vital materiality encourages students’ reflection on their ethical responsibilities as writers. It conceives of writing as a community practice, where the community extends into the more-than-human. It can bring attention to the materiality of writing itself, including the affordances of the materials and spaces in which writing occurs. It can also lead to teaching practices that hone the students’ attention to the vitality of the world in, and of which, they write. It is this potentiality this article takes up, by presenting five strategies for object-led writing, devised for a postgraduate creative writing course on research methods at the University of Sydney’s Chau Chak Wing Museum. The goal in teaching object-led writing is to foster perceptual capacity for the vitality of physical objects, to show the potential of working with objects in creative writing practice, and to encourage reflection on the contexts in which we encounter objects, and the ideas we bring to them.

Object-based learning and object writing

Object-based learning (OBL) is a multidisciplinary mode of teaching with museum collections which prioritises the multisensory, tactile and experiential aspects of educational encounters with materials (Chatterjee et al., 2016). Traditionally these materials include items commonly found in museums such as specimens, artefacts, artworks, and manuscripts, but extends to include natural heritage sites such as parks or natural environments (Kador and Chatterjee, 2021, p. 1). A form of “discovery learning”, it aims to be an active process, physically and mentally engaging, using problem solving or experimentation to deepen engagement with objects (Hein, 1998, p. 30). Prioritising sensory encounter, OBL is readily adaptable for

different disciplines and contexts, although it is most often encountered by name within museum and institutional teaching spaces.

Multisensory and experiential aspects of engaging with objects also forms part of creative writing teaching, particularly life writing and memoir in which “personal-object-based learning” leads to reflection on objects of personal importance (Deller, 2022). Writing with “the thing as writing prompt” (Saward & Wain, 2021) in the creative writing classroom often involves the selection by the student of a significant object, “a physical object that has resonance in your life” that acts as an entry point into a life narrative (Peary and Hunley, 2015, p. 152). These objects are usually drawn from personal collections, which might be an informal family archive, the “box in the attic” that contains family papers, letters, photographs and souvenirs (Couser, 2019), or the more mundane and everyday “keepsake” that offers a “springboard into memory and feeling” (Murphy, 2023, p. 96). This springboard capacity of certain objects can produce powerful associations for writers. Sherry Turkle described such objects as “evocative objects”, which act as “companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought”, and have the capacity to form the foundation of object-centred life narratives (2007, p. 5).

While in life writing the focus has traditionally been on human narratives and perspectives, this does not necessarily place it in opposition to ideas of the object’s agency and relationality, or preclude the lively co-presence of nonhumans. Indeed a focus on objects in autobiographical narratives and life writing opens the way for human life stories to be dispersed through those of objects and things (Whitlock, 2019, 35). Writing with objects can lead to considering objects within unfamiliar cultural contexts (Wilson, 2021), or how encounters with things shape daily experience (Berry, 2021). Literary work can facilitate “questions about the object world” that highlight their more-than-human powers (Brown, 2015, p. 19). Indeed Jane Bennett draws on literary examples to show thing-power in action, such as with the mysterious Odradek of Franz Kafka’s “The Cares of a Family Man”, an animate wooden spool which “straddles the line between inert matter and vital life” (2010, p. 7).

Receptivity to thing-power is enhanced by writing, which brings about a greater awareness and sensitivity of it. Establishing the concept, Bennett writes, “Giving an account of the thingness of things ... might enable me to feel it more intensely,” before going on to describe a chance encounter with an assemblage of trash – “glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick” – that she uses as an exemplar of everyday thing-power (2004, p. 349). Thing-power can be observed in the most mundane and everyday situations, as Bennett’s example proves. Writing facilitates its recognition and understanding, materialising the encounter in language, and providing a framework for attention, as “things press their messages on attentive auditors” (Daston, 2007, p. 12). Creative writing brings about the kind of “poetic attention” (Alford, 2020) that has the capacity to mesh language, imagination and experience in response to the vital materiality of the object.

Within life writing there has been examination of the creative potential of forms such as object biography and object itinerary (Brien, 2019). Object biography was defined by anthropologist

Igor Kopytoff in 1986, as a method of recording an object's trajectory and its changes through time, based on a biographical model. Its literary application often comes with family history narratives, in works such as *The Hare With Amber Eyes* by Edmund de Waal, which traces the story of his family through their collection of Japanese netsuke (2010), and *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* (2021) by Tiya Miles, which is centred around an embroidered sack that was passed down through generations of an enslaved African American family. In both narratives objects accompany and bear witness to persecution and trauma, and provide continuity within fragmented and ruptured human stories. In these examples there is a "mutual constitution and mutual animation of subject and object" (Brown, 2015, p. 19), and such works form exemplars of "thing writing" (Blackhurst, 2015) that is founded on this interconnection.

The terms chosen for these modes of writing reflects a line of scholarship that examines the distinction between "thing" and "object", most notably in Bill Brown's "Thing Theory", which accords things an independent, agential power outside of the dynamic of subject/object (2001). In this article, in line with object-based learning, I refer primarily to "objects" for the sake of clarity and consistency, but with an awareness of the thingly agency of objects, informed by Brown's "thing theory" and the work of Bruno Latour, who describes the dynamic subject/object relationship as one of "circulations, sequences, transfers, translations, displacements, crystallisations" (2000, p. 10).

Teaching object writing

The object-led writing class began in 2019 as a standalone memoir workshop in which participants were guided in using objects of personal significance to access personal narratives. The workshop was of the "personal-object-based learning" type (Deller, 2022), in which objects "materialize memory" (Walklate, 2012, p. 14) for the participants. The initial workshop was designed for a public program associated with the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences publication *Time and Memory*, which combined essays by curators and creative writers examining objects from the collection connected to the themes of the title. In the workshop, participants were asked to bring along an object significant to them to write with. The range of items included objects typically associated with personal or family memory (jewellery, dolls, a photograph) to the more obscure (a hairpiece, a pair of shoes, scissors). While the focus was on personal associations for this workshop, the writer-object relationship was presented as one of "becoming together" (Huff, 2017, p. 280): life narrative co-constituted by human and nonhuman agents and forces. The workshop was sequenced around a series of four writing exercises, on description, emotion, and time and then a final exercise that drew from those previous to produce a piece of memoir/life writing.

Modifying this workshop for the research methods class was an opportunity to adapt perspectives from life writing for a course of study that focussed on process rather than genre. Applying posthuman ideas to life writing establishes that the "life" in this construction is not a quality exclusive to humans, and that life writing necessarily includes the lives of more-than-human entities, including non-human animals, material objects, and places. Posthuman life

writing studies mobilises “a politics of subjectivity that emphasizes relationality and process among disparate types of beings” (Huff, 2017, p. 280). In doing this, it also recognises human accountability in the Anthropocene through an “interplay of relationality and responsibility” (Batzke et al., 2021, p. 5). It acknowledges the primacy of Indigenous ontologies as relational ways of being, and continues the work of feminist, critical race, and disability scholars in drawing attention to those othered in traditional autobiography, recognising that power, and platforms for expression for marginalized groups have been and continue to be constrained.

Recognition of these power dynamics is particularly pertinent when working with a museum collection like that of the Chau Chak Wing Museum. The museum opened at the University of Sydney in 2021 and comprises almost 500,000 items over three major university collections: the Nicholson Collection of antiquities; the Macleay Collections of natural history, ethnography, science and historic photography; and the university’s art collection. These are vast and significant collections: the Nicholson is the largest collection of antiquities in the southern hemisphere and the Macleay is the oldest natural history collection in Australia, including significant cultural material from Aboriginal, Torres Strait and Pacific Islander communities. The collections were established by university scholars in the 19th century, informed by colonial ideology, and examining the role of collecting in the project of empire and colonialism is part of the ongoing work of the museum. For student writers the collection provides opportunities to recognise these ideologies and their role in the establishment of the museum and the university, and that the memory materialised in the collection is, in part, one of colonisation and dispossession.

When Gaynor Kavanagh writes “museums have a particular investment in the belief that objects have a special power”, it is the power of memory, specifically the power of objects to “provoke memory and ideas” (2000, p. 20). This was broadly the aim of the object-led writing class in the museum, further developed through ideas of mutual entanglement, thing-power and the “relationality and responsibility” of posthuman life writing (Batzke et al., 2021, p. 5). Basing the sequence of exercises on those for the earlier memoir workshop, it was with the rationale that notions of life and memory could be applied to the objects themselves.

The objects were selected by Academic Engagement Curators at the museum who conduct and facilitate OBL classes in purpose-built education rooms. For a creative writing class it was important that the objects provoked thought and curiosity, rather than needing to adhere to a particular type, theme or time period, and accordingly the curators selected a variety that spanned the three collections. Over the four iterations of the class these objects have included birds’ eggs, a display of butterflies, a glass vial of hemlock leaves, a bronze thumb from a Greek statue, a water pot in the shape of a pumpkin from 13–14th century China, a stereoscopic postcard of a Sydney city street in the 19th century, a conch shell, a fragment of meteorite, and a wax model of a human foetus. Applied to the objects were six exercises, based on the original four, on description, emotion, knowing, time, and chance, culminating in a final exercise of producing a piece of object-led writing. The exercises represent strategies for writing with objects that accord and respect their vital presences, and form a model for a process of attunement to material objects and the more-than-human in creative writing. The focus on

process is important: the exercises were put forward as experiments (Mayer, 1978) to accompany observation, critical thinking, and experimentation with voice, tone, style and language. In the cumulative nature of the exercises, practice can be seen to take the form of “emergent encounters with matter” (Rotas, 2016, p. 180), which can be differently inflected to focus on multiple aspects of this encounter.

Whale Tooth

The whale tooth is heavy and I hold it carefully. Worn and cracked, grey-brown, it looks more like a piece of petrified wood than how I imagine a tooth, especially against the smooth surface of the blue nitrile glove I am wearing to protect it from the oils in my skin. The room is brightly lit and temperature controlled and the tables have been set up for safe object handling, covered in a cushioned plastic matting. This provides a clinical backdrop against which the details of the museum objects can be more readily observed. While the students are examining the range of objects I inspect the whale tooth which, out of all the objects on display, is the one I am drawn to. On one edge, near where it would have been embedded in the whale’s mouth, the tooth is labelled in black marker: *Sperm Whale Tooth, M1519*. The stark inscription gives me pause as I consider how to go about writing with the whale tooth. Guessing by its size, as big and wide as my hand, and its worn condition, it likely came from an older animal, its life story long and inaccessible to me: speculation guided by my physical encounter.

There is an elevated mood in the classroom, the students enlivened by the vibrant materiality of the objects which, at this point, have been presented without contextualising information to explain what they are and where they are from. Some, like the sperm whale tooth, have been labelled, but the majority are enigmatic to the students, who carefully examine them, following the instruction to inspect the objects by observing visually and by touch, following their affinities to select one to write with.

Description

Initial observations and the process of object selection lead into the first writing strategy, description. In prose fiction description is often regarded as subsidiary to narrative: it “tends to recede into the background, if readers do not skip over it entirely in order to get to the action” (Zhang, 2020, p. 3). While in some disciplines description is employed as a method, such as in ethnographic “thick description” (Geertz, 1973), description has a subordinate position in literary studies and humanities scholarship. Often regarded as inferior to interpretation and explanation, it is nevertheless “a core, if unacknowledged, method in all scholarship and teaching” (Best et al., 2016, p. 2).

Understood as “enhanced attention”, description is a relationship between *how* we describe and *what* is being described (12, emphasis added). The vitality of the subject of description can often exceed the author’s intentions. A stark example of this is conveyed in *Dark Emu* by Bruce Pascoe (2014), which powerfully demonstrates how descriptions in colonial accounts capture the scale and diversity of Aboriginal land management practices. The colonists’ attention was directed towards the economic potential of the land for their own benefit. As they described

features such as clear ground with soft soil, or fields of yams, they described Aboriginal practices of cultivation that can now, as Pascoe demonstrates, be clearly read as such. The colonists were blinkered in what they perceived by their ideas of racial and cultural superiority, but the physicality of the land has persisted in their descriptions.

Attention, including the attention that comes through the process of writing, is a key quality of Bennett's vibrant matter, which makes the case for "a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces" (2010, p. xiv). With this as a framework for object-led writing two interrelated modes of attention are at work. Firstly, attention to the more-than-human, and secondly, a writerly attention which seeks to render the object in language, together working to form the "what and how" of description. Within posthuman life writing one strategy to decentre the human is to de-emphasise narrative, in order to foreground relationality (Huff, 2017, p. 280). As narrative scholar Erin James suggests, posthuman life writing might accommodate other forms of life through a "breakdown of narrative". "It might feel like a weird story. It might even be a little boring because breakdowns in narrativity often occur in description, when plot is not happening, or when events are not happening" (in Batzke et al., 2021, 235). In *Narrative in the Anthropocene*, James troubles this division between event and description, which is based on Gérard Genette's opposition of narration (actions, events) and description (people, objects). Events, James argues, register on objects and bodies in ways that might only be accessed by description (2022, p. 98), revealing action and event to be intra-active, comprised of human and more-than-human entanglements.

In poetry a focus on the "lyric moment" creates conditions in which writers can give themselves over to the experience of an object without the expectations of narrative (Doty, 2010, p. 23). In defining description as "an inexact, loving art" (2001, p. 6), Mark Doty places focus on human consciousness and its limitations. These limitations become present when description is understood as a "mode of thinking" which is particular to the perceiver (Doty, 2010, p. 35). Doty's long ekphrastic work of prose *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (2001) is an example of this. Doty meditates on a 17th-century Dutch still life painting by Jan Davidsz de Heem and the network of personal, material and philosophical associations his scrutiny of it provokes. By extending so widely out from his perceptions of the object, Doty reveals the productive nature of his limitations, writing to find their edges. In another expression of the what/how dynamic, Doty defines description as a balance of "saying what *you* see and saying what you *see*" (p. 45, emphasis in original). This does not exclude, however, that a perceiving consciousness can be informed by attention to the more-than-human, and attuned to the co-constitutive nature of encounter.

After this exercise, I ask if writing the object description is an easy task. What could be simpler than writing a description of an object you have right in front of you? The students tell me that it is more challenging than it seems. Focussing on the object is difficult, without pulling away from it, into narrative, interpretation or extension into metaphor. The task of description does, however, engender a focussed attention to the object's material qualities, staying with its physical, worldly presence in all its complexity, rather than regarding the object as a prompt only, subsidiary to the text it inspires.

Feeling

Sherry Turkle's concept of evocative objects is founded on "the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things" (2007, p. 5). Turkle's *Evocative Objects* expands this idea through autobiographical essays which centre objects that the authors "feel at one with" in some way (p. 9). These range from everyday and manmade things such as a suitcase, a vacuum cleaner, a glucometer and a 1964 Ford Falcon, and also include objects from the natural world such as apples and slime mould. The authors, many of them scholars associated with MIT where Turkle is a professor in the social sciences, were asked to "choose an object and follow its associations: where does it take you; what do you feel; what are you able to understand?" (p. 7).

Whitlock notes the challenge to the evocative object found within Bennett's vibrant matter, in which "objects are not evocative and companionable attachments to individual human subjects; nor are they obedient, passive repositories of family history. Rather, 'vibrant' matter challenges the parsing of life into dull matter (objects, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)" (2019, p. 35). In the creative process of writing with objects, however, positioning these ideas in opposition denies the significance of the writer's emotional responses and affinities in facilitating access to the object's vitality. The writer's feelings towards the object, which are in part a reaction to its materiality, can lead on to an appreciation of its agency. As Bennett explains, "we at first may see only a world in our own image, but what appears next is a swarm of 'talented' and vibrant materialities (including the seeing self)" (2010, p. 99). For students and writers new to such concepts, a writing process that acknowledges the inextricable connections between objects and emotion acts as a means for them to experiment with ways of acknowledging object life and agency beyond the human.

This process of self-selection is common in collections of object writing, whether it be of everyday objects, or art, museum or heritage objects such as in *Things That Talk* by Lorraine Daston (2004). Objects chosen by the contributing authors include glass flowers, Rorschach blots, the Pfaueninsel (Peacock Island, near Berlin) and paintings by Jackson Pollock. Daston notes in her introduction that "by some process of reciprocity, our things individualized us as we picked them out" (p. 11). This process of selection, then, can be thought of as a reciprocal one, where the object works upon the writer.

In the museum classroom students must choose their object quickly, by noting their feelings of attraction or repulsion as they examine the selection on the tables by sight and touch. Sara Ahmed argues that "emotions cannot be separated from bodily sensations" (2004, p. 12), and touch plays an integral role in the relationships the students form with the objects. In considering the role of the haptic in new-materialism-informed OBL, Kay Are posits that touch can be considered "a research methodology for the purposes of exploring and constructing an object's history that inevitably will also be an autobiography: a way of figuring the material world as it touches back" (2021, p. 81). The power of embodied, felt encounter is key to methods such as Narungga poet Natalie Harkin's "archival poetics", which reckons with

colonial archives through practices of writing and weaving (2019). The work of archival poetics in colonial archives is that of disruption and reimagination, creating “new offerings for the future record” that restores dignity and agency to silenced ancestors (2023, p. 7).

In the museum class, touching the objects can facilitate a sense of “co-becoming” (Are, 2021, p. 75). I experienced this with the whale tooth. I was first drawn to it visually, by its size and patina, which stoked my curiosity. As I felt the weight of it in my hand a jolt of emotion stirred me, seizing my chest, so that I had to take a deep breath and remind myself to stay focused on conducting the class. Students reported other strong emotions connected with their chosen object, be it revulsion at the wax model of the foetus, delight at the Staffordshire dog figurine, or awe at the fragment of meteorite. It was the materiality of the objects that provoked these responses: the “lifelike” nature of the wax, the textured ceramic approximating the dog’s fur, the density of the meteorite and its scuffed surface, abraded (we speculated) by its passage through space.

A concentration on feeling – including touch, emotion, and bodily sensation – might bring about writing that centres personal associations, but it is important to consider how this is led by the object, through an encounter that draws together the physicality of both the writer and the object. To bring attention to the dynamic of this relationship, “feeling” is used as the second exercise/strategy in the class, after description has first oriented attention to the physicality of the object. This then forms the basis for the third exercise, a consideration of knowing and knowledge, following bell hooks, who articulates a knowledge derived from sense and emotion: “we are called to learn from our senses, from our feeling states, and find their ways of knowing” (2009, p. 83).

Knowing

So far in the sequence of strategies, writers have engaged a knowledge process through description and feeling. The third strategy poses the question “what don’t you know about the object?” The foundation of practice-led research is coming to knowledge through practice, with the recognition that knowledge can be “unstable, ambiguous and multidimensional, can be emotionally or affectively charged” (Smith & Dean, 2009, p. 3). In the museum classroom this multidimensionality is manifold, framed by the university as a knowledge institution, and the museum an institution within it that has been constituted by practices of colonial knowledge-gathering (Gopal, 2021, p. 877). The objects in the classroom are evidence of this. They are extracted from different places, environments and cultures, and collected, classified and categorised. Working with these objects is an opportunity for critical thinking around knowledge systems and the ideologically informed processes by which museum collections – and universities – are formed. This questioning occurs within the embodied process of knowledge-making that comes with encountering the objects and writing with them.

Karen Barad makes an argument for the importance of practices or performances of representing, noting that “knowing does not come from standing at a distance and representing but rather from a direct material engagement with the world” (2007, p. 49). In a practice of

object-led writing, this combines careful attention to sensory encounter with an awareness of distancing factors. Object-based learning traditionally positions the object as stimulus or facilitator, in which the encounter with it leads on to an attainment of knowledge. A posthuman object pedagogy instead centres a thinking and writing “with” objects (Taylor et al., 2022, p. 209) and emphasis on the knowledge arising within encounter. Informed by posthumanist thinking, Kay Are conceives of a “diffractive OBL” that centres the “co-implication of the biographies of object and student”, rather than “manufactur[ing] a story about or for objects” (2018, p. 8). This can be enabled by experiments with different orientations or inflections of proximity toward the object, taking into account what Bennett describes as “that which refuses to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge” (2010, p. 3).

A focus on knowing brings to the fore the object-writer relationship as one of exchange, and also one of limitations, of the aspects of objects that reach beyond immediate human access. Until this point in the class the students have not been provided with the catalogue record for the objects, a deliberate strategy to highlight modes and limits of knowing. What students find, upon reading these records, is that they only go some of the way to addressing their curiosity. The record for the bronze thumb, for example, includes this information: Greco-Roman period, from Thermos, Aetolia, Central Greece, 1892, by Professor JW Woodhouse. “Life sized thumb with fingernail cuticles and knuckle visible, broken at connection to hand. The underside of the thumb is indented where struck by a hammer” (Bronze thumb from a life-size statue).

From this information a host of anthropocentric questions might result – Whose thumb? Whose hammer? – as well as recognition of more-than-human entanglements, metal being “always an alloy of the endeavours of many bodies, always something worked on by geological, biological, and often human agencies” (Bennett, 2010, p. 60). Creative writing that is mindful of these agencies, even with something as ostensibly human an artefact as a sculptural fragment of a human figure, recognises concepts of life and knowledge that extend beyond the human. It accords to the object a power that directs the writing process, following the approach of “poet of things” (Willard, 1965) Francis Ponge, who declared, “The object is always more important, more interesting, more capable (full of rights): it has no duty whatsoever toward me, it is I who am obliged to it” (2008, p. 4).

Time

The process of object-led writing through materiality, emotion and knowing leads on to an investigation of time and the multiple temporal registers that are activated by objects and processes of thinking and writing with them. These include material, cyclical and planetary temporalities, those of memory and history, and of the writer-object encounter itself.

Barad’s agential realism makes the point that “the making/ marking of time is a lively material process of enfolding” in which past, present and future are entangled rather than linear, and that matter itself creates time. In this notion of time “the past and the future are enfolded participants in matter’s iterative becoming” (2007, p. 181). This has resonances with the “everywhen” of Aboriginal temporality, in which all times find “embodiment in the present”

(McGrath, Rademaker & Troy, 2023, p. 7), unlike the linearity of Western, colonial time. Bringing this understanding of time to object writing is to acknowledge its depth of cultural significance, as it is lived and practiced through creative expressions. Reparative work with colonial archives, such as Harkin's archival poetics, is one such example, as a future-facing practice, seeking to “repatriate stories, agency and love to our Ancestors for the future record” (Harkin 2023, p. 8).

Writing with objects, a focus on temporality allows for access to timescales beyond the human, contained within the temporality of the encounter, which is one of immediacy. In the class each writing exercise is five to ten minutes long, and the time spent with the object is contained within the two hours of the session. With an attentional framework oriented towards time, focussing on the object's relationship to it, students can write into multiple temporalities, be it through the lifespan model of the object biography, experimentation with language to express shifting or entangled times, or the immediacy of their encounter. Barad emphasises the potential of the moment as a key to multiple temporalities, “alive with different possibilities for the world's becoming and different reconfigurings of what may yet be possible” (2007, p. 182).

As a posthuman approach to life writing expands the notion of life beyond the human, it troubles anthropocentric notions of time, and reflects the temporalities of the Anthropocene (Huff, 2019). The shifts in scale that a comprehension of the Anthropocene involves, “planetary scale thinking across aeons”, can be accessed by close attention to objects, which have the “power to bridge spaces and join times” (Mitman, 2018, p. 12). One model for this is *Future Remains: A Cabinet of Curiosities for the Anthropocene*, a collection of object-led essays that use the proto-museum format of the Cabinet of Curiosities (*Wunderkammer*) as a structuring device. While the original cabinets of curiosities were concomitant with colonial ideologies of the seventeenth century, contemporary artistic reworkings of the *Wunderkammer* aim to “disrupt order” (245) and destabilise categorisation (Esslinger 2017, p. 171). Objects in the collection include concrete, which is given voice in a performance script; a pesticide spray pump, presented as an object history; a jar of sand as a personal essay; and a mural painting by Wiradjuri artist Trisha Carroll, its cultural story told through a transcribed conversation. With the material presence and agency of these objects comes “alternative forms of thinking through time” (Mitman, 2018, p. 34), whether that be deep time, geological time, the half-life of chemicals or the time of material degradation.

Life, defined as forces of vitality, also refers to time: lifespan, or life story. Object-writing forms such as object biography highlight the interconnection of these two understandings. This interconnection can also assert in the powerful presence of objects within human life stories, where human and object temporalities combine. In literary narratives objects can reveal how human life is “enmeshed in matter and that we have to account for the agency and vibrancy of physical stuff” (Tischleder, 2014, p. 18). In Maria Stepanova's *In Memory of Memory*, a multi-genre work which examines material traces of memory, one such object are the small porcelain dolls known as “Frozen Charlottes”. By nature anthropomorphic, dolls can give a sense of “arrested life” (Stewart, 1993, p. 57). These “frozen” dolls attest to that definition, as they are

also shown to have a vigorous material life. Hollow, they float in water. Over time they chip and break, their pieces, it was said, were “used as packaging chips for transported goods” (2021, p. 240). They are dug up from landfill sites, and they reappear as antiques and their imperfections and fractures are scrutinised. The Frozen Charlottes are a figure for Stepanova’s conception of broken memory; their material agency makes and marks time.

Chance

Writing with objects and their vital materiality makes for engagement with non-human agency and expanded notions of time, as it also draws attention to experiential elements of the writing process. In object encounters “the messiness of the experiential” is at play, “the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 30). Chance and contingency characterise encounters with objects, whether it is the “glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick” assemblage Jane Bennett noticed on the street, or the singular “evocative object” that becomes significant over others. The associations and entanglements that the writer follows as they write with the object are also driven by the contingency of the writer-object encounter. In an essay on the significance of objects for writing and memory, Tony Birch writes of an experience at a wake for a friend’s father, where he was invited to take one of this man’s personal items as a keepsake. Birch chose an “egg-shaped, ivory-coloured stone”, which has gone on to become an important object for Birch in his writing practice, and for thinking with. “I often hold it in my hand when I’m thinking about the words I want to write (as I’m doing now),” he writes, bringing the stone’s tactility and materiality into the essay as a lively co-presence. “I have thought *with* the stone about life and death and my love for my friend, who misses her father so deeply,” Birch continues, drawing together encounter, life, materiality, and processes of thought and writing in his relationship with the stone (2020, p. 35, emphasis in original).

Creative writing is comprised of “diverse and dynamic activities and actions” (Peary, 2015, p. 85), and a focus on process in the teaching of it enables experimentation, play, and the embrace of the contingency of the moment. In her article on site-specific and object-focused creative writing classes, Christine Wiesenthal describes how “thinking through things ... helps ground those writers in real time and space” (2016, p. 195). The time and space of the museum classroom is one in which, from the student’s perspective, their object encounter is determined by chance. The objects are outside of the ordinary, and the students’ encounters are energised by this unpredictability.

Chance-based methods can also drive creative research practices. A model for this is *Monet Hates Me* by Tacita Dean (2021), an artist’s book and installation based on archival drawings, texts, photographs and objects. Dean, a visual artist who works with analogue film, photography, drawing and installation, undertook an artist residency at the Getty Research Institute in which she used the Surrealist method of “objective chance” – a form of serendipity in which coincidences are believed to be driven by unconscious desires – to determine the project. Dean contrasts her intuitive, chance-based approach to the traditional scholarly research trajectory. Instead, Dean notes “I skid across knowledge and research by tripping over things. I more often identify my reasons for making a work at the end of the process rather than

the beginning” (p. 12). Accordingly, Dean proceeded through the Getty archive in an unplanned way, by making chance discoveries of objects between which she charts associations. A water stain on a nineteenth-century manuscript echoes a black and white photograph of a blazing firework; an illustration of a hand-shaped piece of coral calls to mind a muslin hand, filled with lavender, that Dean inherited from her grandmother. A project such as *Monet Hates Me* is permission-giving for acknowledging the role of chance and intuition in the creative process, and the creative potential in giving over to the physical, material and associative qualities of objects.

Conclusion: Object-Led Writing

Object-led writing centres the life of objects, their more-than-human vitalities and their temporalities. The successive strategies of observing, feeling and knowing, and receptivity to forces of time and contingency, shifts the writer’s position in relation to the objects they are writing with. The process draws attention to human limitations, biases and affinities, as it tunes in to object life, within the co-constitutive nature of the object-writer relationship.

Rather than instilling humanist ideas of “objects as things which exist as vehicles, to provoke the educative power of human interpretation” (Taylor et al., 2022, p. 216), object-led writing involves a process of close, careful attention, attuned to distributive agency and thing-power. This does not lead to a predetermined literary form or outcome, although the process is informed by the self-reflexive and emotionally attuned approaches of life writing, particularly posthuman life writing and its attention to life beyond the human. Objects can direct the text, such as in the object poems of Francis Ponge, they can act as talismanic writing companions as in Tony Birch’s essay, or they can make material interventions in narratives, such as the Frozen Charlotte dolls of *In Memory of Memory*, but in a process of object-led writing the outcome may not be predictable. Over the four years in which I have annually conducted the museum class students have produced work that is consistent only in the fact it is always varied and surprising.

Teaching through tactile, sensory encounters with museum objects reveals the potential of object-based learning for creative practice, in which close attention and critical thinking combines with the experimental, intuitive and playful aspects of the creative writing process. The fundamental interdisciplinarity of creative writing enables a flexibility in working with museum objects, in situations in which the encounter provides a framework for enquiry, knowledge, and literary production. Even in a thoroughly digital age creative writing involves embodied, physical processes in a world of vibrant matter, in which the writer is a part of a dynamic network of vital energies. Teaching creative writing with a focus on process and materiality, enriched by an expanded notion of the life of writing, enables understanding of it as an interconnected practice.

This article has focussed on the museum context where this model for teaching object-led writing was developed. However the strategies can readily be adapted to writing with objects in personal collections, in everyday situations, and to collections chosen by instructors or peers.

They can be adopted and adapted by educators, or by writers seeking to attune their writing to the life and complexity of objects. The physicality of the world is fundamental and enduring. Wherever object writing occurs, by bringing attention to material, embodied encounter, and relationality, it is an enriching, practice-based methodology within creative writing.

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