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Archive of illness

Abstract:

I first started writing this piece in 2020, when during the day I was working on a PhD using archival research and at night I was unpacking and settling into a new home. In both capacities, I was keenly considering objects and the place they hold in my life and home. I was interested in how these objects felt like both a part of me and beyond me. These ideas were made more urgent when considering how objects have an inextricable connection to my own ill health. A dodgy piece of pottery, a cucumber plant, and sketches put together with cheap acrylic paints all became and continue to be a part of my archive as someone with lived experience of multiple chronic illnesses. Yet as this was written five years ago – perhaps ironically – I now consider this essay a part of an archive on objects and illness, instead of a snapshot of my present life.

Biographical note:

Katerina Bryant is a writer based on Kaurna land. Her first book, *Hysteria: A memoir of illness, strength and women's stories throughout history* (NewSouth), was published in 2020.

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Hidden in my office cupboard is a little dish that just fits in the palm of my hand. It is thick and clumsy. Painted in red watercolour, with a misshapen sphere on the edge that's grey blue. I made this dish two years ago. Rolled out air dry clay, bought from the kid's section at Bunnings, on my glass desk. (I was not capable of writing at the time). I hadn't left the house, except for shifts at work, for weeks. I forced myself to the broad aisles of Bunnings, filled with the possibility that maybe a project would help.

This hidden ceramic might be the ugliest thing I've ever seen. It is in no way useful; too small to fit anything. When I dig into the cupboard, searching for extension cords or university transcripts, this dish reminds me of the numb darkness that engulfed my body. Perhaps saddest of all, it reminds me of the hope I felt. As if kneading clay into clumsy shapes could lift this feeling.

Yet, I can't let the dish go. This artefact of sadness. The best I've managed is to keep it hidden.

I've been thinking about what is left behind after bouts of illness. Depressive episodes punctuated by thick watercolour paper and coils of clay. The superb weight of these artefacts. It feels that even when a feeling shifts – a reprieve, perhaps – the object remains. Its presence reminds me not just of the pain I've experienced, but the pain ahead. No feeling is final but I shift through episodes – up up up down down down – and this has always, will always, be. The objects I create while unwell collect; I'm making an archive of illness.

I stay up until 2am threading loops of cotton yarn across my knitting needles. I'm determined to finish this perfect thing: a tangerine orange cardigan, made for a friend's child who is not yet born. The day before, I bought wooden buttons online then showed mum my work. We are amazed at the size of newborn clothing. How cute.

I knit by the blue light of my laptop screen while my partner sleeps. When I wake the next day, I stretch my hand and feel the ripple of pain across my knuckles. Up my fingers. I run warm water over them but it doesn't help. I keep knitting anyway, my body twitching with panic.

I have worked with archives for the past three years. Requesting and sorting through boxes of transcripts, images, film and sound. Staring at digitised newspapers, eyes growing blurry from hours of looking at the flatness of black and white. I learn that this type of work is a mix between the drudgery of sorting methodically – not knowing what will be important until it all lays before you – and the thrill of finding the unexpected. In many ways, it's like piecing together a puzzle. I imagine the archive puzzle as a blurred photo of a field of wheat; thousands of yellow pieces. Challenging but warmly familiar. I think an archive puzzle comes from an op shop, so you're never sure if all the pieces are there.

Some nights, as I'm trying for sleep, I remember the feeling of unrolling a circus poster at the National Library of Australia. Pulling it out from a neat white box, removing the tissue paper and gently rolling it out to reveal the neon yellows and reds. The poster fills a whole table; an elephant and clown are depicted holding up the sign proclaiming 'Circus and Zoo' on the

poster's lower half. I adore the quiet of these moments of looking. Absorbing little pieces of the past. My mind becoming lost in the objects before me, falling into flow state in the same way as when I sit with my paints or hunch over my knitting needles. It's not until a year later that I'll realise working with archives has changed how I view the world – filling me with a desire to mentally place objects into collections. I begin to think nothing exists on its own; it lives as part of something bigger.

At Bunnings (again), I buy a punnet of mint and a cucumber plant with perfect oval leaves. As I plant them, head heavy and without thought, I feel the dirt against my fingers. Pushing into my nails. I hear the thick noise of bees nearby and the shift of my dog, asleep in the sun.

In the coming weeks, barely able to hold myself upright, I take to sitting in the garden. It's something my therapist is pleased that I do, breaking up the day like this. It takes me a while to admit I'm not gardening. I'm not capable of that kind of movement. I am almost absent from myself, sitting by my plant and staring. I watch a ladybird walking over cucumber leaves that have grown large with curled edges and feel the buzz of my brain.

Only now, with thoughts that come easy, I am able to see these plants as part of my illness archive. I pull mint leaves to make tea and smell the brightness of them. My nose clears and I think through what it means to pick and prepare and eat objects of depression. Is this the embodiment of a silver lining? I wonder if positioning myself in this way is not a hopeful reframing but incredible vanity. These plants are living things, growing and stretching despite the fluctuations of my mind.

I've learnt that archives are amorphous. They are not just paper; they are our homes. An archive is not always precious, something to be touched with cotton gloves. I think of archives as junk drawers and land fill with unfurled VHS tapes and 80s crisp packets. It's my own misshapen objects, created in despair and hope of healing.

I'm almost a thousand words into this essay and I have not mentioned the most common archives of illness: medical files. I sit with a psychologist and he opens up my file to a new, blank page. Each session, I look at the registration form stapled to the front. My large block handwriting. I'd filled it out at my most unwell. Nervous to enter this room and be let down, once again. I think of the mental health plans I've filled out over the years. Collections of K10s – the anxiety and depression checklist you have to complete each time. My GP's barely concealed frown of concern when I pass it back. Not that it matters. My illness can't be understood within the framework of these questions. *About how often did you feel tired out for no good reason? About how often did you feel nervous?* Sometimes I answer truthfully. Others, I scale it back wondering if I tick 'all of the time' too often my GP will suspect me of lying. Can anyone feel that nervous, that regularly? One thing has remained static: the goal set each time with my GP. Always 'ongoing management'.

I know medical files are an archive of (ill) health, but I cannot give them centre stage here. They are traditional. Sorted, kept, and protected under guidelines. Rules so stiff that during the

worst of the pandemic, I had to come in to collect the mental health care plan I'd created with my GP over the phone; I was told it was not safe to email my own file to me. Part of my annoyance was not only the added risk of movement during COVID, but the framing of the privacy of my plan as being more important than both my and other patients' safety. My plan is not a helpful tool, or one filled with detailed health information. It is a hurdle I am made to jump so I can afford treatment. Sometimes, it feels like an inconvenience while others, an exercise in humiliation. I begin to think that these records are not as accurate as the pieces kept in my home. That misshapen dish tells me more about living in my body than my K10 from the winter of 2016. The fingerprints along its surface somehow communicate more to me.

I give a talk at the SA History Trust about women and mental illness. I look online at the State Library of SA archive and find a drawing of the 'Lunatic Asylum' in 1860 (Shaw, 1860). It's pictured as an intimidating building. Ornate. In front of it, there is a towering agave. Next to the plant, a group of people on the grass. One in a chair, hunched over a book. The others are sitting on the ground and look to be a woman and her two children. I wonder if the artist saw them there or added them in his mind's eye. Did they ever exist? Are they another illusion bolstered by records? It takes a moment, examining the details, for me to look beyond this maybe-family. At the edges of the sketch is the large brick wall surrounding the asylum.

Below the image is a description:

Set in six acres of land on the corner of Hackney and Botanic Roads the asylum was built in 1851 to an English Tudor revival style attributed to colonial architect William Bennet Hayes. The building was of stone with brick trimmings, lattice windows and timber verandahs. In 1937, the Botanic Gardens ceded four acres on its western boundary to the hospital in exchange for the Lunatic Asylum and grounds.

As early as 1866 the Asylum had become overcrowded and considered below standard but it was not until 1902 that the last patient was moved to the Parkside Asylum. It was used as an infectious diseases hospital until the main buildings were demolished in 1938. What remains of the asylum are Yarrabee House, part of the walling and the morgue which is used by the Botanic Gardens as a tool shed (Shaw, 1860).

The history centres on the building, the place, not the people who lived within it. The archive obscures patient voices. Only one person is mentioned but not by name: 'The last patient' (Shaw, 1860). In this collection, all the information is about the building itself. This is an obscuring kind of violence. Not the worst I've seen by any means. I've read patient files of people who share my illness, daily cruelties masked by medical language. I've looked at images of women's bodies; names of hospitals and doctors etched onto their skin. This violence thought of – or excused – as treatment. Sometimes, like the archive itself, the record of violence feels too much. It smothers.

At the History Trust, I ask the audience: What of history do we keep? What do we record? And whose stories do we tell?

Another one: a painting of the salvia in my garden in bright mismatched acrylic. I took my Kmart art supplies into the garden, sitting in the sun and trying to make. I'm still in my flannelette pyjamas, kept on from the day before. This is all the movement I can handle for now. I tell myself I'll shower before dinner. My dog sniffs me curiously, dotting her large nose against my forearm. The next day, when the painting is dry, I shove it into a draw. It sits atop all the others.

Some think archives are about the future, not the past. Others see it as a way to construct one past and in the process, bury others. Some don't use the term – thinking it too vague, too amorphous to be useful. I read how people shape and define this idea of the past as existing in the archive. The more I read, the more unsure I feel. I realise, outside of State Archives, the term 'archive' has no structure. I am free to construct packages of my past – ephemera of illness – as archive. Within a library setting, flicking through collections, the boundaries of what an archive can be seem to constrict.

As a child I collected turtle figurines, *The Simpsons* memorabilia, bits of paper, old plastic bags. I felt panicked at the thought of throwing anything away. I kept this panic to myself, storing away old Post-it notes in plastic tubs in the guise of order. Other kids would tell their parents about how messy I was, as if comparing themselves to me would make them look better. I remember finding it amusing, that anyone cared what my corner of the world looked like. All these years later, this specific anxiety outgrown, these collections only exist in my memory.

I read Arlette Farge in *Allure of the Archives*. I repeat her words in conference papers, reading them aloud and feeling the swell of comfort in them. 'Working in the archive you will often find yourself thinking of this exploration as a dive, a submersion, perhaps even a drowning...you feel immersed in something vast, oceanic' (Farge, 2004, p. 4). Farge writes the archives into familiar images. The ocean. Even streets. 'Measured in kilometers like roads, the archive seems infinite, perhaps even indecipherable. Can you read a highway, even if it is made of paper?' (Farge, 2004, p. 4). It's difficult to voice the comfort of this image, roads thick with paper. The immensity of all that has been written down, pushing its way into daily life.

I begin to become hyper attuned to how we collect information. I go to a chain juice place near my home. I Google the menu while my partner drives and see it is listed as 'archive'. I laugh heavily enough for my partner to look at me questioningly. I try to explain that, even for me, this feels a little much.

Writing this, I search this term again and find 'archive' is no longer there. It has been replaced. 'Our drinks.' I'm frustrated with myself, having failed to screen grab the wording at the time. Shouldn't I of all people know that everything is constantly in flux? Nothing can be relied upon to stay.

Later, I'll wonder if it was there at all. If I imagined this phrasing into existence.

In my mind, I try to separate my archive of illness from those that exist outside of my home: folders of medical files, recording the many ways patients have been failed. I return to my dish. Ugly as it is, when I look at it my illness is not obscured. It can express what I cannot. My archive speaks of hope and movement and pain. It is uncomfortable to look at – all I can see is an embodiment of struggle. But I begin to think there is something pure in this. I look at my archive of clay and paint and, even, words and see the beauty of them. There is an honesty there. As if by keeping them, I am holding onto my own record. I'm not obscuring who I am, just learning to live with it. I think there's freedom in acknowledgement, even if it doesn't change the shape and pattern of my illness.

I am unwell and I knit a toy. I move between grey and white yarn, knitting and stuffing and assembling a dog the size of my hand. I knit it on my own, looking out the window at the red wattle tree on my street. I knit it sitting beside my partner as we watch the latest show recommended to us by Netflix. When I finish – still unwell, but now with this completed object – my partner places it on his desk. The toy is displayed and each day, it catches my eye as I work. I feel it nearby. A knitted-on smile, part of my archive.

References

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Shaw, J. (1860). *Lunatic Asylum* [Artwork]. Digital Collections, State Library of South Australia, <https://digital.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/nodes/view/651>.