



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES

Number 61 April 2021

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

A wall of stuff: object itinerary as a framework for writing the souvenir

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To cite this article: Nisbet, G. (2021). A wall of stuff: object itinerary as a framework for writing the souvenir. *TEXT Special Issue 61, Writing Through Things: Writing the Past and Broken Things*, 25 (April), 1-18.

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Abstract

Both creative writers and scholars of material culture have recognised the power of objects; the way they can transcend their intended functions and exhibit a quality that is lively and even agential. In my previous career as a travel journalist, I amassed an extensive collection of souvenirs that are now making such claims on my creative writing practice. This article seeks to conceptualise the active quality of those souvenirs in relation to processes of autobiographical memory – that is, how they shape and mediate the ways we remember and forget our lives – and considers how creative writers might best respond to and represent this attribute. It proposes that the object itinerary, an iteration of the object biography concept, is a useful framework for the creative writer seeking to engage with not only the character and origins of the power of souvenirs and other objects, but also the ways they work in relation to memory.

Biographical Note

Gemma Nisbet is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Western Australia, researching how life writing and the personal essay can consider the relationships between memory and objects, particularly souvenirs. She has taught creative writing at Curtin University, and writes a weekly book review column for *The West Australian* newspaper.

Keywords

material culture – souvenirs – creative writing – object itinerary

Introduction: a wall of souvenirs

When people come into the room where I work for the first time, they almost always stop and stare, their progress suddenly arrested. Their eyes are invariably drawn to the wall behind my desk, where I've hung a series of five or six cork pin-up boards, their surfaces so closely packed with all manner of material that it's hard to see where one board ends and the next begins. Pinned to them is an assortment of souvenirs collected before, during and after the years during which I made my living as a newspaper travel journalist. There are quite a lot of postcards, both vintage and modern, and a fair few business cards from restaurants and bookshops. There are pages clipped from foreign newspapers and magazines; coasters from bars; badges and a fabric bookmark handwoven on a traditional loom by a woman whose workshop I once visited in Puglia. There's a cash-out voucher – value, twelve cents – from a casino in Las Vegas, and a purple wax-printed napkin souvenired from a popular Mexican restaurant in Bali. A scorecard from a minigolf course in Texas, and a small print made by a First Nations artist in British Columbia. Then there are the items that aren't souvenirs in the sense of having been brought home from journeys, but which I think of in much the same way: as travelling objects, connected to other times and other places. Among them is a small metal horseshoe that I've owned since childhood, and a black-and-white photograph of my late father with his father, the two of them standing side-by-side.[1]

I've spent a good portion of the past five years seated in front of this display, trying to write creative nonfiction about souvenirs. Sometimes I've just sat and let my eyes run over the objects on my wall like water over rocks. My attention might pool on an embroidered goldfish from Hong Kong, or a sticker from an Arizona outdoor equipment shop, before it runs over and flows onward. One of my main motivations for wanting to write about this stuff has been this pull, this charisma, that the things on my wall seem to exert, both on newcomers to my study and on me. This attraction has been much theorised by posthumanist and new materialist scholars. It is what Bill Brown calls 'thingliness' (2001, p. 5) and what Jane Bennett describes as 'thing-power': 'the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness' (2010, p. xvi); their 'curious ability ... to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle' (p. 6). There's also a growing interest in this quality among creative writing practitioners and scholars, who have found a number of ways to attempt to represent this 'active, expressive or calling power of things' (Bennett, 2011) in their work. Some have turned to the object biography, tracing the 'lives' of an artefact like one might a human being's (as in, for example, de Waal, 2010). Others have utilised the metaphor of speech, exemplified by the it-narrative of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and its modern-day iterations (such as Flynn, 2020), but also by writing that seeks to offer objects a somewhat less literal 'voice' (such as Robertson, 2020). However, the theoretical framework that I think best captures the active quality of things borrows, appropriately enough, a metaphor from another object ubiquitous from my time as a travel journalist: that of the itinerary.

When I write 'itinerary', however, I do not mean the kind of neatly ordered document that I used to receive before heading off on assignment. Instead, I mean the object itinerary, a concept that arose initially from the anthropological and archaeological studies of material cultures. It seeks to understand objects as lively, active and potentially agential while recognising that they may work in ways that are unlike human subjects. Indeed, although both the object itinerary and its influential older sibling, the object biography, were originally theorised as ways to

narrativise the circulation and social connections of artefacts, the object biography uses the metaphor of a human life to achieve this, viewing things through a potentially distorting anthropomorphic lens (Joyce, 2015). Object itinerary, on the other hand, is an iteration of the object biography that has emerged in large part as a corrective to the latter's anthropomorphising tendencies (Bauer, 2019). The object itinerary seeks to conceive of the power of things as something thing-like, rather than human-like (Joyce, 2015). It emphasises qualities such as relationality (Joyce & Gillespie, 2015) and a focus on nonlinear journeys and narratives (Bauer, 2019). It is interested in breaking down temporal distinctions between the past and present (Bauer, 2019), and in the relationships between things and their representations (Joyce & Gillespie, 2015). These and other characteristics make the object itinerary a useful analytical tool for the creative writer seeking to conceptualise not only the character and origins of the power of souvenirs and other objects, but also the ways that they work in relation to memory.

The word *souvenir* derives from a French verb that means 'to remember', and memory has indeed been central to my *souvenir* wall project – to assembling it, and to thinking and writing about it. When I first started putting the display together, I suppose I was hoping it would help me to remember more, and remember better. That it would allow me to hold on to moments from my travelling life even as they seemed to slip by, subsumed in the wash of deadlines and the current that pulled me on to the next story and the next place – not to mention the inexorable ongoingness of life. This desire gets at the way we've become used to thinking about souvenirs and other objects that we use to remember: as vessels for memories that fulfil what Beverly Gordon, in her influential essay on the topic, calls the *souvenir's* 'concretizing function'; that is, its ability to 'locate, define, and freeze in time a fleeting, transitory experience' (1986, p. 135). This desire to preserve experience strikes me as a quintessential writerly impulse – indeed, a quintessential human one. However, this idea of the *souvenir* as a straightforward mnemonic device fails to account for both the thing-power that these objects exhibit, and current understandings of how memory works as a process of continual reconstitution, rather than retrieval, of the past within the context of present.

Indeed, as time has progressed, it has become evident that each of the objects displayed on my wall is not a mere container for memory, but an active participant in remembering. I have come to see that these things might privilege specific memories and perspectives while working to obscure others. That, just as they have arrested the progress of newcomers to my study, so they have shaped the ways I have thought about the things I have seen and the places I have been. This is another way the object itinerary can be useful to the creative writer: as a framework to help us unpick the ways that souvenirs and similar objects can mediate and influence how we remember (and forget) the past. Bennett quotes Spinoza's suggestion that even a falling stone 'is endeavouring, as far as in it lies, to continue in its motion' (2010, p. 2), and the souvenirs on my wall have seemed, at very least, to behave in a similar manner in relation to memory. Through the sheer force of their presence in the room where I work and thus spend most of my days, they have steered me towards recalling certain aspects of my travelling life over others that were not, perhaps, as readily represented in material form. They are good at reminding me of art galleries and market stalls and cocktails drunk in beachfront bars, but they are not necessarily as potent when it comes to less tangible pleasures: the scent of a hotel where I once stayed in Dubai, or the stillness of an early morning walk through cobblestoned streets. And they seem to have little to convey about the inevitable moments of loneliness or fear or illness

that accompany every traveller. Thus, although I have largely been unaware of it, these objects have actively shaped the ways I have remembered the past.

Background: object itinerary and object biography

It is useful, first of all, to consider what we mean when we use the terms ‘object biography’ and ‘object itinerary’, and what some of the major differences between them might be. Object biography was originally theorised by Igor Kopytoff in his influential contribution to Arjun Appadurai’s *The Social Lives of Things* (1986), which proposed that things can ‘be usefully regarded as having life histories’ (Appadurai, 2013, p. 17) that can trace shifts in the ways they have been used and understood over time. The aim was to make ‘salient what might otherwise remain obscure’ by asking ‘questions similar to those one asks about people’, including:

Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognised ‘ages’ or periods in the thing’s ‘life’, and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing’s use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness? (Kopytoff, 2013, pp 66-67)

The object biography is, as Donna Lee Brien has noted, rich with potential for creative writing practitioners and researchers (2020, p. 1), and has been taken up by a number of creative writers interested in parsing the ‘lives’ of things (for example, Lively, 2001; de Waal, 2010; Lively, 2013; Ward, 2014). Furthermore, the object biography’s focus on tracing the journeys of things over time is particularly relevant when it comes to thinking about souvenirs. It represents a way to conceptualise something like Gordon’s ‘concretizing function’ – that is, the ability of these objects to evoke the past within the present – while acknowledging that an object’s meanings and potentials can change over time. In this way, object biography begins to recognise how the significances and effects of an artefact can shift at various points during its ‘life’, and thus goes some way towards capturing objects’ liveliness and mutability.

There are, however, issues with the object biography. Prominent among them is the way that it seeks, as Rosemary A. Joyce and Susan D. Gillespie assert, ‘to imagine that things are alive in the manner of humans’ (2015). Joyce writes that ‘the lives of things can be distorted when forced into the mold of a human life course’, with object biographies carrying ‘forward some problematic aspects of the initial subject-object dualism that contemporary theory is contesting’ (2015). This, in turn, impedes ‘our understanding of how objects work in the manner of things, instead personifying them in the manner of humans’ (2015). One particular life event that has been seen to strain object biography is death, with Hans Peter Hahn and Hadas Weiss arguing that describing the ‘end’ of an object reveals the problems with the biography metaphor ‘[m]ore than any other moment’ (2013, p. 4). Does, for example, an object ‘die’ when it falls out of use? How, then, can we account for objects that, according to the biography metaphor, appear to have ‘afterlives’: artefacts that resurface at archaeological digs, but also heirlooms and keepsakes such as those on my wall that lay ‘dormant’ in drawers for months or years before being added to the display? Perhaps we might posit that an object dies when it is thrown away, but what of things that are recycled or otherwise taken apart and reconstituted? Have they been ‘reincarnated’? As Joyce and Gillespie note, this presupposes ‘that continuous bodily integrity is essential for the continuity of existences’, in spite of the fact that objects ‘can be and often are transformed continually while remaining connected to their past stages’ (2015).

It is partly for these reasons that, Alexander A. Bauer writes, the last decade has seen a progression from object biographies towards the concept of object itineraries in anthropology and archaeology (2019, p. 335). Gillespie defines the ‘biographical orientation’ as ‘changes experienced over time’, with the itinerary thus focussing attention on ‘movement in space, duration in time, and change along the way’ (2015). It asks questions including:

how and where things move or are moved in performative interactions, the work they do and the effects they bring about, the way stations where they may temporarily come to rest, the routes they take and the means by which they move, and their physical changes as a result of moving and stopping. (Gillespie, 2015)

Writing from the perspective of an anthropologist and archaeologist, Gillespie seems to identify object biography as being more strongly associated with tracing things through time, and object itinerary with additional attention to spatial journeys. This distinction has not necessarily been borne out by literary examples of the object biography, which quite often follow objects through both time and space (de Waal, 2010 is just one example of this). Indeed, it is worth noting that the two concepts share a good deal in common in terms of the ways they narrativise our relationships with objects. Therefore, as Bauer suggests, the shift towards object itinerary ‘need not be a wholesale repudiation of the biography concept’ (2019, p. 344), but instead represent an iteration of it.

There are, however, other qualities broadly associated with the object itinerary that help to differentiate it from the object biography. These include those already mentioned (breaking down the past-present dualism, a focus on relationality, and so on), as well as the object itinerary’s attention to the manufacture of objects and the ways they might be broken down, reused or recycled (Joyce, 2015). Conceptually, the itinerary also accounts for the kinds of idle periods that have strained the object biography metaphor. An itinerary ‘does not assume that things are constantly traveling or are defined by their movement’ but acknowledges that they ‘may experience long periods of stasis’ (Joyce & Gillespie, 2015). Particularly significant for my purposes is the object itinerary’s interest in examining objects’ nonlinear journeys (Bauer, 2019). Although the equation of the object itinerary with nonlinearity may seem counterintuitive – as Carl Knappett notes, ‘it is difficult to imagine a non-linear itinerary’ (2013, p. 37) – this may be more an issue of naming than form. Indeed, ‘things in motion’ may be a more accurate term for the thing we call object itinerary, although the latter has been favoured for its direct parallels to object biography (Joyce & Gillespie, 2015). It is useful, then, to conceptualise the object itinerary in the terms cited by Hahn and Weiss: as something ‘associated with the itinerant’, which in turn ‘emphasises a mobile form of existence’ (2013, p. 8). Thus, I have come to think of it as something less like a chronological document prepared by a travel agent and more like the ordered chaos of the route maps that airlines publish on their websites – or, indeed, like my souvenir wall, with its dense accretion of overlapping, richly layered stuff.

‘Crazy walls’: relationality and the power of things

It has been suggested, perhaps unkindly, that my collage of souvenirs resembles one of those displays – variously known as ‘link charts’ (Dees & Hawk, 2014), ‘murder boards’ (Coley, 2017), and even ‘crazy walls’ (Benson, 2015) – that detectives in crime shows use to pin up and plot out connections between clues. The comparison does, admittedly, work on the level

of aesthetic similarity, capturing something of the layered texture of my board's materiality. There is also, perhaps, an affinity in intention; a sense that both I and our imagined detective have been searching for something in assembling our respective displays of stuff. However, where the detective is trying to reach a firm conclusion about the crime under investigation, I have had no concrete goal beyond a generalised desire to remember. And yet I can identify another, perhaps more substantial, thread linking these endeavours. Both the detective and I are interested in revealing connections that might otherwise remain obscure: in placing things side by side in search of the spark that can result when two apparently unrelated things come into contact. Both of us are assembling stuff in the hope of finding something more significant than the sum of its parts. Both of us have recognised, even if only implicitly, that the power of objects lies, at least in part, in their interconnectedness; in their relationships with one another and with us. This is a quality of stuff about which the object itinerary can provide a useful perspective.

The idea of relationality is central to the theories of a number of new materialist thinkers, including Bennett, regarding the source of objects' thing-power. Bennett recognises that objects cannot be described as active or agential in the human or animal sense – that of, say, getting up and walking around. But she also rejects the idea (advocated by the likes of Gell, 1998) that an object's ability to produce effects and influence its surroundings is something secondary and supplemental, delegated by humans as a result of the culturally inflected meanings ascribed to it. Hence Bennett ponders whether thing-power is 'a property of the stuff or of the people' (2010, p. 10). Her answer is, essentially, that both play a role, in conjunction with one another and with the object's physical and cultural context. She has sought to conceptualise the object's active quality by theorising 'distributive agency', which draws on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of the assemblage and Latour's (1996) idea of the actant to understand the power of objects as arising from 'a confederation of human and nonhuman elements' (Bennett, 2010, p. 21). Their power thus becomes something co-constituted, originating from all the elements of a scene – both human and nonhuman – coming together at a particular moment in space and time. Furthermore, the implication seems to be that it is inherently impossible for us to perceive our objects outside of the matrix of human associations, relations and meanings through which we inevitably view them. All of this is borne out by the example of my souvenir wall. Had I stuck one or two or even half a dozen of these objects up behind my desk, I doubt that visitors to my study would have been quite so transfixed by them. Yet the power of these objects is not something discrete, that can be cordoned off from the world. The way the sunlight filters through the window; the effect of the paperback cairns on my desk in the foreground; the prior knowledge of my life and interests that visitors to this room do or do not possess before they enter: all of this is also implicated in my souvenir wall's charisma.

Bennett's theory of distributive agency points to one of the strengths of the object itinerary in this regard: its focus on the complexity of the entanglements between people, things and other forces. Bauer contends that object biography 'privileges a narrative approach that is historical and cumulative rather than relational and multinodal', whereas object itinerary can help researchers to 'fully consider objects' present entanglements as central to their story' (2019, p. 336). He writes that '[i]f social relations themselves extend in different directions in a series of disconnected engagements ... then object relations must similarly be recognized as extending out in different directions and with different temporalities and linkages' (p. 338). Object

itineraries can assist us in parsing these relations, due to their focus on objects' intertwined spatial and temporal trajectories. As Joyce proposes, every 'fragmentary or whole thing is encountered at a place on its itinerary, a spatial and temporal locale whose specific character and particular effects it helps to create', just as 'their meaning or potential for action is inflected by their coming to rest in specific places' (2015). Thus the itinerary opens up the possibility of mapping the webs of meaning and connection in which and from which active objects circulate by paying attention to the 'locales' (per Joyce), 'way stations' (per Gillespie, 2015) or 'stops' (also used by Joyce) along it. This requires attention not only to the ways the specifics of these times and places shape the potentials and effects of the object, but also to how the object itself (with its individual significances, material qualities and so on) might alter the possibilities of a particular moment.

What, then, can I learn about the things on my souvenir board and my relationship with them from the current stop on their itinerary; from the moment in which they have come to rest? The obvious thing linking them is the fact that they have passed through my hands: that they have been picked up in places all over the world by me and brought home to be arranged in my home. Thus, though I have not explicitly set out to attempt some kind of self-representation with them, these souvenirs may transmit information regarding my identity and taste. Danielle LaSusa has suggested that souvenirs can work as status symbols, 'to be displayed for and seen by others' in a show of middle-class 'conspicuous consumption' and 'conspicuous leisure' (2007, p. 280). Though I have not been consciously aware of such a motivation in assembling my souvenir wall, there is, of course, the possibility that it has existed at some unacknowledged level of perception, or that it might feed into the interpretations of visitors to my study. At very least, in assembling these things and displaying them in my workspace, I have asserted that I am someone who is interested in remembering – who wants to hold on to the past. Either way, all of this may help to account for the fact that visitors' intense interest in my souvenir wall has always felt uncomfortably revealing, as though I were granting people access not to a room of my house but to the inside of my head.

Remembering with things: past, present and future

Another effect of the object itinerary framework's focus on relationality that is suggestive for the study of souvenirs is its potential to illustrate how the stops and journeys along an object's itinerary are interconnected, with the meanings of each rebounding on to and affecting the meanings and potentials of the others. This, in turn, challenges the idea that the past and the present are somehow separate – that the past is a settled, stable thing and that our understanding of it exists in isolation from the influence of the present. The ability of souvenirs to seemingly transcend both time and space has been noted by a number of scholars (including Gordon, 1986 and Stewart, 1993). However, the object itinerary conceptualises this quality in a somewhat different way. By understanding the stops and journeys along an artefact's itinerary as relational rather than cumulative sites of meaning, it illustrates how the significances of each of them can influence the meanings and potentials of the others in a potentially nonlinear fashion. Knappett suggests that the object itinerary's ability to transcend the past/present duality can help us to overcome the false sense that 'there is a hermetically sealed past immune from the present, if only we might find ways of accessing it' (2013, p. 38). Thus, it recognises that 'the past can only be known to us in the present through a series of traces that have been

worked on over time' and that these are 'endlessly reconstituted' rather than existing 'in sequential order, the one isolated from the other like catalogue cards' (p. 38). Therefore, just as we cannot comprehend an object outside of the web of cultural associations in which it exists, so we cannot view the past except through the lens of the present and the more recent past.

To make sense of this quality in terms of my souvenir wall, it is helpful to zoom in on an item displayed prominently within it: the black-and-white photograph of my late father with his father, the consideration of which might serve to further illustrate how the object itinerary can work in a creative writing practice. The photo was taken when my father was in his twenties and was newly married to his first wife, a French woman he had met while undertaking a PhD in geology in the US. The image is one in a series shot when he and his then-wife accompanied his parents on holiday to Europe, presumably to meet her family. It is a photograph I have written about during the course of my own PhD research, in a personal essay that addresses a small suitcase containing a collection of mostly mundane stuff (including the negative from which the photograph in question was printed) that belonged to my grandfather, who died shortly after I was born. The essay is, in part, about the appeal and frustrations of trying to get to know a person you have never met through their possessions. But it is also about trying to understand my father's (perhaps somewhat strained) relationship with his father and his (not entirely positive) feelings about the small Australian town where he grew up.

At the heart of the essay are a number of family stories that I have heard since I was a child, when I used to hold those negatives up to the light to catch a glimpse of the images they depicted. The story relevant here contends that my grandfather had been disappointed that my father had gone to university rather than following him down the coal mine into 'a job for life'. The short-sightedness of this statement was often emphasised when this story was repeated to me when I was young. The mine where my grandfather had worked had, by that time, long since closed, and the town where my father had grown up had been hollowed out as a consequence. In contrast, my father's geological career was a very successful one, and took him to places I suspect his parents would not have imagined for him. Thus I had grown up thinking of my grandfather in the way I supposed that my father did: as someone who was well-intentioned but had failed to recognise the opportunities education offered his son. The photograph seemed, to me, to reflect the strained father-son relationship I had extrapolated from this story and from my father's more general silence about his father. And so it struck me that in the picture, my father and my grandfather both looked uncomfortable, standing close but not touching as they half-smiled, half-grimaced for the camera.

It is worth noting that the meanings of this object are shaped not only by the narratives and significances associated with it, but also its material properties. There is, I think, a risk that in focussing on the relationality of objects, we may neglect their materiality. This is significant because an object's material characteristics can, if nothing else, significantly constrain its future potentials (consider, for example, that otherwise identical objects made of paper and steel would almost certainly be differently durable). Furthermore, they may, as Roberta Gilchrist notes, affect the way an object is valued (or not) at different times, and provide physical evidence of how it has been used, valued or exchanged in the past (2013, p. 171-2). The possibility of overlooking materiality may be heightened when the object in question is a photograph: Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart suggest that in scholarly and critical writing on the subject, '[t]he prevailing tendency is that photographs are apprehended in one visual act,

absorbing image and object together, yet privileging the former’ (2004, p. 2). However, they write, ‘it is not merely the image *qua* image that is the site of meaning’, with materiality serving to translate ‘the abstract and representational “photography” into “photographs” as objects that exist in time and space’ (p. 2; their emphasis).

When it comes to the photograph of my father and grandfather, considering one of the object’s most notable physical characteristics – the fact that it is in black and white, rather than colour – may illustrate how materiality can help to inform meaning. Black-and-white photography has been characterised as imparting a sense of distance; as Michael Freeman notes, black and white ‘is not the way we see the world’ (2013, p. 9), while colour photography ‘carries with it, automatically, the presumption of being close to reality’ (p. 54). And yet black-and-white photos have also been described as possessing an air of truthfulness and/or authenticity, at least in terms of indicating that a particular image is ‘authentically’ of the past, given the extent to which black-and-white photography has fallen out of favour in recent decades (Grainge, 1999, p. 384). All of this may have played into the assumptions I have previously made not only about the image of my grandfather and father, but also the family stories it has seemed to encapsulate. Its monochrome colouring might, for example, have encouraged me to impose upon it many of the common misconceptions about the past that I have mentioned above. For instance, for quite a long time, the temptation was to assume that my interpretation of this image, and the stories associated with it, were the authentic and truthful versions of the past, and that they were, furthermore, somehow settled and ‘finished’ – that they were simply the facts of the matter. However, by considering this object and its meanings through the lens of the object itinerary, I have come to see that these stories and interpretations are constantly open to re-evaluation and revision.[2]

Indeed, writing the essay about my grandfather’s suitcase has quite considerably altered my view of the picture and the relationship it has come to represent. By researching my grandfather’s life using the stuff in the suitcase, online resources such as Ancestry.com and conversations with family members, I have reconsidered my understanding of him. Handling his things has furnished me with new details and perspectives on his life, enabling me to make an educated guess at how things might have looked to him at various times, as opposed to how they have appeared to me with the benefit of hindsight. I learnt, for example, that my grandfather belonged to a long succession of men in our family who had worked in coal mines both in Scotland and Australia; that coal mining was a family tradition with deep roots. I also discovered that when my grandfather was in his late forties, he was retrenched from the mine where he had worked for thirty-one years, and that afterwards, he seemingly had difficulty finding comparable employment. At the time, my father would have been in his mid-teens and studying on a scholarship at a grammar school in a larger town in the region. By that stage, it may have been apparent that my father’s career and ambitions would take him well beyond the place where he had grown up; that he was likely to move away and make a life that would be quite different from that of his parents. As I wrote in the essay:

[T]he timing struck me as significant, and made me wonder whether my grandfather’s disappointment that my Dad hadn’t followed him down the mines might have been based in something else entirely ... In failing to follow his father down the mine, my Dad had rejected not only a job ‘for life’ but also, implicitly, a way of life. (Nisbet, 2020)

Considered in this light, the photograph started to take on a somewhat different character. Instead of seeing in it two men who were ill at ease, I began to perceive two people who were

far more similar than they were different; who wore near-identical expressions on their faces and had made the effort to come together, far from their respective homes, for this trip. Instead of noticing the distance between them, I began to recognise their relative proximity.

Central to both that essay and to the reconsideration of my grandfather's life and legacy that it has entailed is an attempt to view past situations and events as my grandfather might have seen them at the time, without my knowledge of how they would play out. However, I have also tried to recognise the inherent impossibility of seeing the past except through the combined lens of the present and the more recent past. Thus, my understanding of the past becomes something that is open to reassessment and reinterpretation. Furthermore, as Knappett suggests, there is a sense here of meaning being relational, rather than cumulative, and once again the object itinerary proves useful in conceptualising this. To simplify somewhat, I can identify four major sites of meaning along the photograph's itinerary as it pertains to my essay: the moment at which it was taken; my childhood knowledge and experience of it through the negatives; my understanding of the photo and my grandfather as an adult prior to writing the essay; and my use of the picture in my own creative practice (including having the photo printed from the negatives) and the changes in meaning this precipitated. Viewed from the position of the third site, the photograph and the relationship it represents seem to mean one thing. Viewed from the fourth site, they come to mean something different. Thus, the meaning of the first and second site also shift, in ways that remain ambiguous to me. How did my father really feel about his father? Did my father repeat the story about my grandfather's comments because he perceived in them a rejection that continued to sting? These questions point to the fact that this project has also involved recognising that elements of the past are, perhaps, destined to remain mysterious.

The example of my photograph as viewed through the lens of object itinerary suggests how the past is, as Knappett describes, 'endlessly reconstituted' by the present (2013, p. 38). This model of remembering, conceptualised by tracing an object's itinerary, seems far more in keeping with current understandings of the workings of memory than the souvenir-as-memory-container idea exemplified by Gordon's 'concretizing' souvenir. The psychologist and writer Charles Fernyhough, for example, has described memory not as 'a static, indivisible entity, an heirloom from the past', but 'a sometimes effortful process of imaginative reconstruction'; something that 'happens in the present tense' (2013, pp. 6-8). According to this understanding of remembering, memories are reconstituted each time they are 'accessed' and are thus vulnerable to alteration every time they are recalled (Neisser, 1996). 'The information from which an autobiographical memory is constructed may be more or less accurately stored,' Fernyhough writes, 'but it needs to be integrated according to the demands of the present moment, and errors and distortions can creep in at every stage' (2013, p. 6). Thus we can see how the photograph's continued presence on my wall exemplifies the ways that the past – through its impact on the stories I tell about my family – not only *affects* the present, but can also have a physical presence *in* the present through souvenirs. It recognises that the memories I have sought to encapsulate in the objects pinned on my wall are things that can change as they move through time and space, just as those objects are subject to change physically (by, for example, showing signs of wear or age).

Furthermore, the object itinerary can assist us in thinking through the ways that remembering with things involves not only the past and present, but also the future. Fernyhough suggests that our 'ability to recall the past might only be a fortunate by-product of our evolution of a

memory system', and that the 'greater value' may have been our memory systems' ability 'to foretell the future' (2013, p. 126). He gives the example of preparing to give a talk. 'Although the format of the event is unfamiliar to me, I am not completely in the dark about what will happen,' he writes. 'In order to plan for my talk, I can draw on memories of previous events I have been involved with' (p. 127). Thus, being able to remember the past (in this case, previous talks he has given) helps Fernyhough to predict what a future event (his forthcoming talk) might involve, and plan accordingly. Memory is, in this way, 'Janus-faced, looking both to the past and the future' (p. 127). In terms of my photograph, we might conceptualise this future dimension in terms of identity. The memory researcher Martin Conway makes the case that our autobiographical memory and self-identity are closely interconnected. According to his concept of the self-memory system, '[t]he relationship between the working self [that is, our current goals and associated self-image] and long-term memory is a reciprocal one in which autobiographical knowledge [that is, our memories of our lives] constrains what the self is, has been, and can be, whereas the working self modulates access to long-term knowledge' (2005, p. 594). To put it another way, 'the self constrains what is remembered, and memory constrains possible selves' (Sutton et al, 2010, p. 215). Therefore, the stories we tell about past – about our own lives, and those of our families – shape our self-identity. This affects not only the decisions we make about the future, but also the ways we continue to think about past events. The memory-object thus not only evokes the past within the present and actively influences that present through its presence, but also shapes both the future and our future memories of the past.

Representations as journeys: consequences for the practice-led researcher

The photograph of my grandfather and father can be understood as an iteration of another object – the negatives I held up to the light as a child. That the journeys of the photograph and the negatives are meaningfully interrelated seems self-evident. However, my simplified analysis of the photograph's/negatives' journeys using the object itinerary framework points to another type of connection that is, perhaps, more readily overlooked: that of representation. In tracing (some of) the journeys of the photograph/negatives, I have identified my personal essay as a site of meaning that is based in representations of these items; I would, furthermore, add this essay to that category. Conceptualising these two textual representations of a thing as potentially meaningful journeys in this way is a hallmark of the object itinerary (Joyce & Gillespie, 2015). What's more, it is a particularly significant characteristic of the object itinerary for the creative writer as practice-led and/or practice-based researcher, helping us to think through the ways that objects and their meanings and potentials may be transformed through creative and research praxes. It also enables us to render explicit the positions from which we come at our objects, revealing how these points of view may inflect the meanings and journeys of things, and the stories we tell about them.

Joyce and Gillespie note that in the object biography model, representations of an object (such as their depiction in drawings, photographs or prose) have been described, somewhat awkwardly, as 'afterlives' (2015). In contrast, by emphasising that the past and the present are interrelated, the object itinerary asserts that 'potent phases of activity' such as representations 'are not separated by a sharp temporal break between a time of the past and time of the present', as the object biography's life/death/afterlife metaphors seem to suggest. Thus, Joyce and

Gillespie write, object itineraries ‘have the potential to resist the imposition of a boundary between a thing and representations of it, allowing us to ask when a reproduction or translation of a thing remains actively connected to it’ (2015). An object’s itinerary, then, need not be limited to its physical travel. This recognises that ‘the relations between things and their representations in story, song, image, and memory continue to create new sites’ of meaning, and that such representations can be ‘continuing parts of the way things work agentially in concert with other things, humans, and a variety of forces’ (2015).

Thinking of the ways I have used the photograph and negatives in my creative and research praxes as additional sites of meaning on their itineraries is suggestive not only of how such work can physically transform an object, but also the ways it can affect the object’s significances and potentials. This helps to unpick how these representations may inflect the meanings that I currently and may in future attribute to the photograph, and thus how I think about the memories, people and family stories to which it is connected. For example, writing about the objects in my grandfather’s suitcase prompted me to have the photograph printed from the negative. Writing about this photograph has, in turn, helped me to gain a better understanding of and a deeper sense of empathy for both my father and my grandfather. It has, in a sense, allowed me to continue (as in the case of my father) or establish (as in the case of my grandfather) relationships that have been cut short or impeded by death. In this, my creative engagement with these objects can be contextualised as belonging to a stream within life writing and auto/biography which suggests that using objects to engage with memory can help us to reinterpret the past and come to terms with unresolved and/or unhappy memories (see, for example, Couser, 2017; Walker, 2018; Robertson, 2020). What the object itinerary adds to this picture is an extra degree of self-reflexivity about this process, which can lead to a number of useful insights.

Firstly, by understanding how an object can be transformed through creative and research practice, we can consider the ways this may inflect our current and future understandings of the object’s earlier journeys – including, crucially, how these transformations might work to erase or obscure previous journeys. For example, being incorporated into my souvenir board has quite considerably altered the meaning and value attributed to certain objects on it, and therefore might draw attention away from their prior meanings. The display includes a number of items that have previously been regarded as essentially rubbish, including ticket stubs, swing tags from clothing and receipts (‘Books Are Good For You,’ declares my favourite, from a now-defunct Perth bookshop). By displaying these things on my wall, I have conferred upon them an elevated significance that belies (and perhaps works to erase) their previous status as refuse. How this could affect their future journeys might be implied by considering the items in my grandfather’s suitcase, most of which are fairly commonplace, but which I have come to regard as personal treasures. This change in status suggests a danger of misinterpretation: that I might transpose my own belief in the sentimental value of these objects (a result of their persistence through time) on to my father or grandfather’s relationship to them. Thus, I might take an item that meant little to them (a scribbled note; a piece of official paperwork) and misjudge its importance, simply because my grandfather and then my father did not dispose of it (an action that suggests but does not guarantee that they valued it). I am, obviously, unable to able to ask my father or grandfather about why they hung onto these objects, so there is a risk of drawing false conclusions about their motivations. Here, the basis for my faulty

reasoning would be the fact that later journeys undertaken by the objects in question have potentially obscured the true nature of their prior journeys and meanings.

A second way that the reflexivity of the object itinerary can be valuable is in encouraging clearer articulation of the positions from which we, as creative writers and researchers, relate to things. If an object's meaning and power is understood to be co-constituted with the nonhuman and human objects and forces with which it comes into contact, then it follows that it is necessary to consider how the points of view from which we comprehend an object's meanings, potentials and journeys might alter that understanding – and, in turn, affect the item's future meanings, potentials and journeys. Creative writing is a discipline seemingly well placed to do this, given its interest in point of view and in attending to the positions from which creative practitioners and researchers write; indeed, this may be an example of something that creative writing can bring to the object itinerary as much as the reverse. Furthermore, there is a recognition among scholars studying souvenirs in other fields of the utility of making explicit the positions from which a researcher writes. For example, in his work on souvenirs, visual culture researcher Michael Haldrup has justified his autoethnographic methodology in part because it 'enables us to more directly explore the relation between researcher, objects and others in the narrative' and thus 'our emotional and sensuous relations with the mutable objects themselves and the affects and effects they generate' (2017, p. 54). Tourism studies academics Nigel Morgan and Annette Pritchard have similarly drawn on autoethnography, using their lived experience 'to overcome that sense of artificial opaqueness in much tourism scholarship' and recognise 'that the same academics who strive to write "objectively" about travel are, have been and will be tourists, travellers or post-tourist cynics' (2005, p. 35). The object itinerary's interest in articulating the point of view from which we come to our things can thus be seen as an extension of this broader drive.

What, then, might this consideration of my own position mean in terms of my souvenir wall and my representation of it in my creative and research praxes? It might, for example, prompt me to give thought as to how having left my career as a travel journalist could inflect the ways I interpret the objects on my souvenir wall. It may encourage me to consider whether the fact that I am writing this essay during a time of global pandemic and lockdown, in which travel is greatly restricted and the home has taken on heightened importance, might impact the ways I think about these travelling objects. Moreover, it calls attention to the gaps in my perception and knowledge: to the things I may have missed, or forgotten, or failed to witness. It pulls my eye towards a small square of paper near the centre of the display: a cartoon by the artist Will McPhail (2018), neatly torn from the pages of *The New Yorker*. In it, a man and a woman recline on deckchairs on a beach. The woman is reading a magazine, but the man's eyes are wide, as if he has received a nasty shock. 'Oh no,' reads the caption, 'we're still us.' I showed this cartoon to students in a unit on travel writing that I was teaching during the early days of the pandemic; the point was to draw attention to the fact that everything we see when we're travelling is filtered through the lens of our preconceptions, prior experiences and sense of self. I wanted, back then, to encourage my students to think about the idea of a narrative persona. Now, however, the cartoon serves as a reminder that the moments I have attempted to hold on to with my souvenirs can only ever be my version of those events.

The 'life' of stuff: Potential issues and conclusions

In spite of its promise for the creative writer, the object itinerary does present a number of possible issues. First of all, there is a risk that in viewing objects as drawing power from relationality, we may default to conceiving of this force as something delegated to them by humans rather than being mutually constituted within the networks of meaning in which they and we exist. Furthermore, in spite of the object itinerary's interest in the places at which objects come to rest, Knappett suggests that in charting the movement of objects through time and space, there may be a danger of forgetting 'some of their most critical features: durability, stability and persistence' (2013, p. 47). I'd suggest that the language of the itinerary, with its focus on 'journeys' and 'way stations' – words broadly suggestive of motion – may work against it in this regard. It is important to consider, then, 'how artefacts are *actively durable* over time' as well as the ways they can change, both in terms of their materiality and meaning (Knappett, 2013, p. 47; his emphasis). The suitcase filled with my grandfather's belongings might provide an example of how the simple fact of something enduring through time could affect its meanings and potentials, and thus obscure salient information about its prior journeys.

The third potential issue seems more difficult to avoid. Joyce suggests that object itineraries can 'reveal the effects of things in motion without demanding that we reduce things to the status of quasi-human agents' (2015), but it is difficult to entirely avoid the metaphor of a life. In attempting to articulate why the object itinerary appeals to me, I can only say that it is because it suggests that an object might have a 'life' outside the human connections to it and conceptions of it, even as I find myself struggling to locate a vocabulary to articulate this without resorting to an anthropomorphic metaphor. Vesa-Pekka Herva argues that 'there appears to be more than metaphor involved in the "life" of things' (2005, p. 218), but there is a sense, perhaps, of butting up against a linguistic or epistemological limit. Bennett describes her notion of thing-power as seeking 'to acknowledge that which refuses to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge' and trying, 'impossibly, to name the moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things' (2010, p. 28). She suggests that we can glimpse these things as 'lively bodies that are unparsed into subjects and objects' only 'through a window that opens' but which 'has a rickety sash, liable to slam shut at any moment'. One reason for this may be 'a default grammar of language that diligently assigns activity to subjects and passivity to objects'. 'If you ever try to write about vital materiality,' Bennett has said, 'it's very, very hard, because the grammar is organised against it' (2011).

Indeed, I have tried to come up with metaphors other than the itinerary that could do this work, but none (that I've been able to think of) quite captures the ways an object might move in and out of our human spheres of influence at various times as we might similarly move in and out of its sphere of influence. Things and humans thus become bodies in circulation, itinerant but also coming to rest, influencing and affecting one another as they stay and go. Their power, and ours, becomes something co-constitutive, just as the memories they evoke are reconstituted as a joint project between the past, the present and the future. Furthermore, the object itinerary framework suggests that every story about an object does not have to be – and will not be – its whole story. That artefacts will have meanings and effects that we may or may not perceive. That they will retain the capacity to exceed the uses and potentials we assign to them and expect from them. That they will continue to gain our attention; to surprise us; to arrest our progress when we enter a room.

14

that recalls some parts of it even as it forgets others; that might have come together on my wall in a more or less infinite number of ways. In its suggestion of linkages, of chance associations and of things overlapping, alternately revealing and obscuring one another, the ‘crazy wall’ analogy starts to seem more apt than I’d anticipated. What’s more, the display continues to change and grow: its journey and the journeys of its constituent parts are not yet at an end. As I write this, Australia’s international borders continue to be largely closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so I won’t be travelling too far any time soon, but I’ve still been adding new souvenirs to the wall. The other day I pinned up a postcard sent by a friend who lives in Melbourne, positioning it below a picture from Big Bend National Park in Texas, partially covering an illustration I’d torn out of a magazine and a cardboard tag from a t-shirt that I no longer own. And so, when I look at my wall, I think not only about the places all of these things have been, but also where they – and I – might still be headed.

Notes

[1] In common with a number of scholars researching souvenirs, I find it useful to define souvenirs not in the narrow, touristic sense, but more broadly. Kristen K. Swanson and Dallen J. Timothy, for example, characterise a souvenir as simply ‘an object through which something is remembered’ (2012, p. 490), while Noga Collins-Kreiner and Yael Zins propose that souvenirs ‘can, but do not necessarily have to originate in tourism’, making the case for a broader definition of the word (2011, p. 18). Reasons for doing so may include an enhanced ability to capture objects often left out of research on souvenirs; Swanson and Timothy cite examples that include the types of things that I have collected for my souvenir wall, including ‘items not always purchased or shopped for but [which] nonetheless remind travelers of their experience’ such as ‘a receipt from a memorable restaurant, or a museum entrance ticket’ (2012, p. 490).

[2] Furthermore, it occurs to me that the action of the photograph’s physical characteristics in this regard might be mirrored by the materiality of the negatives, which – by shrinking and distorting the images they contain – could similarly be seen as working to both obscure and preserve particular versions of the past.

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Associate Professor Tanya Dalziel for her thoughtful feedback throughout the writing of this essay, and to the anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful comments.