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Ross Watkins

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University of the Sunshine Coast

Ross Watkins

Smashing ourselves to smithereens: Object collection, death, and creative writing as salvation

Abstract:

David Malouf (1985) describes the objects children first encounter as symbols of the unknown – we are 'set loose in a world of *things*', and our only tool to exert power over these objects is the body, as we 'try to swallow them, then to smash them to smithereens… If they refuse to yield their history to us they may at least, in time, become agents in ours' (p. 9); especially once we are able to wield linguistic instruments. But objects go beyond becoming mere 'agents' in the narratives of our lives. As rendered *things* – selected, curated, labelled and preserved in our minds and the pages of books, these objects undergo a horror just as brutal as Malouf's metaphors of consumption and demolition. Objects become us, just as we become objects. This holds true in both life and death – perhaps even more apparently in death, when our objects must be subjectively 'inventorized' (Baudrillard), collected or discarded by those who grieve. Can writing salvage the past? Or does the very act of writing *things* ensnare us in a melancholy gaze? This fictocritical work explores these questions through theoretical and performative discourses, ultimately asking: Through writing, are we smashing ourselves to smithereens?

Biographical Note:

Dr Ross Watkins is an author and illustrator for both children and adults. His adult novel *The Apology* (UQP) was published in 2018, while *One Photo* (Penguin Random House) was shortlisted for the CBCA Picture Book of the Year 2017 and published in North America and China. Ross' scholarly research explores practices in illustrated narrative, representations of melancholy, and radical modes of scholarly writing. Ross is a *TEXT* editor and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at USC. rwatkins@usc.edu.au

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This is the first time we've met P—. The cunt's standing in the sunroom of my grandmother's deceased estate, the sea of brown floor tiles split precisely down the middle. One side of the slab is raised and someone, at some point, installed a concrete patch but it's a poor job. The floor is still a trip hazard, the concrete crumbling. It was covered by a rug but that's now deteriorating in the skip bin out front.

'The house could be shifting,' P— says, a metal box in his hands, like a gift from a wise man. The house is built on sandy soil and backs onto the estuary foreshore, so it could very well be shifting. 'Or it could be tree roots. I've agreed to remove that umbrella tree down the side of the house there. And some Cocos palms. For the neighbours. I think they're owed that, at least.' Joyce didn't make friends. 'They've had to replace their television aerial several times from falling palm fronds, and the seeds hitting the roof keep them awake at night.' Joyce also accused them of stealing her pot plants, dumping green waste in her yard and inching the property boundary line in their favour.

P— puts the metal box on the tiles and drags an old dining chair from the corner of the room, then sits. We all sit, too. My mum on the divan, my eldest brother beside her, and my middle brother on the timber stairs I always worried I'd fall down as a boy. I think I'm tumbling asunder now. I avoid the mustard-coloured two-seater sofa that's been here close to four decades. Last time I visited Joyce – calling in on our way home from Sydney – she sat on the mustard sofa and told us about her latest ailments and suspected cancer. I can't recall which cancer it was at that time. She's claimed a number of them: spinal, cervical, throat. One of her stories was that after giving birth to my father she was rushed off to surgery so they could remove a tumour from her spine, denying the chance to bond with her newborn son. No one believes it. The story was another bid to garner pity; an excuse for a past characterised by emotional manipulation and rejection. Or maybe it was a hallucination. Yes, that's right – cancer of the throat was her latest. Undiagnosed. Yet depriving her of voice. Like when she complained about the community care employees not cleaning the house properly, and how one of them had stolen money then hid her keys and other personal effects out of spite when Joyce complained to head office. Head office didn't believe Joyce either. Instead, they arranged an electrician to decommission her oven after they found her using it to dry tea towels rather than using the tumble drier. This was followed by an application to the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal (NCAT) to appoint the Public Trustee and Guardian as enduring power of attorney based on evidence that Joyce no longer had 'capacity'. That is, the mental capacity to make decisions regarding her own well-being. She was then forcibly removed from the house – this house, the one she wanted to die in – and placed in a nursing home. She was 89. 'Can you imagine?' was her favourite saying. I can only imagine because I wasn't there. None of us were. Her own actions and words made it so.

She died a few months later.

I sit on the old recliner as P— starts talking about the estate's finances and the purse that purportedly went missing from the nursing home. He reads through tree-lopping quotes, electricity and mowing bills, and solicitor invoices, including his own. P— was her solicitor

before he retired. She made him Executor of her Will seven years ago because she trusted him, and when she stopped trusting him she no longer had capacity to change her Will.

'Nan entrusted me with a key to a fire-proof box when I became Executor.' There it is again: Nan. I call her Joyce but he calls her Nan. It's overstepping the mark. I pointed out this anomaly to one of my brothers a few weeks back so my brother called him a cunt. Not to his face, mind you. Not even to him. Both names – Nan and cunt – sprout malignant cells in my throat.

P— continues. 'The box, she said, held items of value. My wife and I have been going through the house each time we come, filling the bins with rubbish, and looking for the box. We eventually found it in the pantry. I've had a look through the contents and there isn't anything meaningful to my eyes.' He looked through the box? I am speechless.

He hands the box to my mother. She must have mixed feelings right now, bearing the burden of sorting through her mother-in-law's things, sifting the detritus for significance, the melancholy of it all, the relief that Joyce is now gone but all this – these *things* she left behind in this double-storey house at the beach, an inheritance – but what, exactly, are we inheriting? – a mausoleum, a coffin replete with the grief of our familial past – among the seashells, record collection, novels, kitchen accoutrements, boxes of tax receipts and income declarations, the swathes of linen, wool and sewing kits, clothing, diaries, photo albums, electrical devices, tools and plant pots and barrels of fertiliser, the boxes of saved Christmas wrapping and cards – used, unused – the puzzles and, amid the puzzle of it all – a house overflowing, overwhelmed and overwhelming in the labour it demands – here is my family.

Mum opens the box. She adjusts her glasses, then lifts the lid off a small jewellery container and removes a sapphire ring. Joyce's brother told Mum she deserved to have that ring, on account of all she was forced to endure – Joyce calling her a 'gutter slut' when my dad started dating her in the early seventies was only the start of it. Mum was nineteen, the daughter of the local Uniting Church minister, and singer-guitarist in the Youth Group. I know those details don't preclude her from being 'gutter' material but, honestly, the accusation couldn't be further from the truth.

Joyce was childish. Jealousy is a curse, and paranoid narcissistic delusions are worse.

'Yes,' P— says, 'there are some wedding and engagement rings, a coin collection and some other objects, seemingly worthless.'

Worthless? Yes, I'm starting to agree: maybe P— is a cunt.

*

> When a loved one dies, suddenly their personal belongings and defining possessions come to the foreground of consciousness – they are *truly noticed*. This noticing is complex and often poignant. Death reconstructs our experience of personal and household objects in particular ways; there is the strangeness of realising that *things*

> have outlived *persons*, and, in this regard, the materiality of things is shown to be more permanent than the materiality of the body. (Gibson, 2008, p. 1)

The living are charged with the task of deciding the value of physical objects we might call the personal possessions of the deceased. A hand-written letter from an old love. A near-new kitchen blender complete with packaging and instruction manual. Triplet crystal decanters. Your father's childhood books. A tin beer can tailored into a makeshift fishing reel, sinker, swivel and hook still attached, although rusted. Is the hand-written letter from the Vietnam War soldier worth keeping? What is its use? What can it tell us about the dead? Or about us? Is the kitchen blender more valuable than the hand-written letter? Which object should be salvaged, and which discarded? Decisions are made in haste and on a whim. Fatigue sets in. It's a subjective task with subjective ends. There is no right or wrong. There is only the Coffs Harbour Waste Disposal Centre, or the Woolgoolga Anglican Church front lawn, or carting it almost five hundred clicks back to my house. And where to from there?

When we decide to keep the objects of the dead, they are then most likely to filter into our households, becoming assimilated with our own, and thereby standing as reminders of the inevitability of death. Margaret Gibson refers to these personal effects as 'melancholy objects' in that they are central in our grieving process and come to memorialise our mourning (2004, p. 286). A physical object can act as a substitute for the lost loved one – an absence made present, to a certain degree. This present-absence (and absent-presence) is liminal and unstable, and keeping objects becomes a choice to 'live with traces of the dead' (Gibson, 2008, p. 1). These objects function as trophies of our loss, signifying the 'incompletion of mourning – a reminder that grief never entirely goes away'. As Gibson goes on to say: 'The melancholy object is then the affective remainder or residual trace of sadness and longing in non-forgetting' (2004, p. 289).

The task of sorting through the objects of the dead is a process predicated on perceived hierarchies of value: objects are of practical, financial, informational or sentimental value. Sometimes these domains overlap, as an object that has a practical application might also hold fiscal and informational value, while imbued with nostalgic resonance. There is a tension here between notions of practicality, logic, reason and order, and the impulses of knowledge, comprehension, irrationality and chaos. The milkglass figurines are valuable because the pair could sell for around sixty bucks on eBay, whereas the divorce settlement documentation is of no use to anyone – why on earth would you want to keep that? Perhaps another question: If I keep it, on what basis do my children decide to salvage or discard it after my own death? Do I want to further complicate their lives? What I decide now might one day come to influence my own potential to haunt this world through my possessions.

What is the significance of these decisions? What damage can be done in this process? Where do the fragilities and frailties lie? Is this a task of salvation or destruction? The decision to retain or discard is not made simply and each decision has the potential to engender an emotional toll, as the narratives instilled in any given object can become enlivened through the process. And further, what happens when we come to write these objects into narrative? What happens when we retain them, not in physical form, but in textual form? In this process of 'non-

forgetting' we are able to narrate. Joyce's story – though fragmented, gap-toothed and, in parts, smashed – becomes combined with my story. Another item on the shelf; each an embedded tale within the frame narrative of our collected and collective lives.

In 'Bracelet, Hand Towel, Pocket Watch: Objects of the Last Moment in Memory and Narration', Mona Korte explores the significance of material possessions (referring to Donald Winnicott's 'transitional objects' theory, as does Gibson) in relation to the narrative of remembrance of the 'Kindertransport', the conveyance of nearly 10,000 Jewish children from Berlin and Nazi occupied Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia to England by rail between 1938 and 1939 prior to the outbreak of war. In the article, Korte (2004) narrates the following story:

> In February 2001, the Jewish Museum in Berlin received a packet containing a small towel, folded delicately and neatly, ironed and embroidered with the monogram: 'MK,' for Margarete Kuttner. It was sent by Paul Kuttner from New York; the hand towel was his last gift from his mother when, as a 16-year-old, he left Berlin on February 8, 1939 on a Kindertransport bound for England. 'It is still folded today as it was on the day that my mother placed it in my suitcase.' It belongs, continued Kuttner, in a museum, where it will be an 'eternal' reminder of his mother [who was killed at Auschwitz in 1943]. (p. 111)

Through subjective connotation, material objects such as Paul Kuttner's hand towel can come to represent not only what is absent but the complexity of affect linked to it. In part, this is due to memory and the disparity between what was, what is, and the role of the imaginary in what could be. Korte (2004) continues:

> By preserving and caring for the object one remains loyal to it, perhaps, because there is an intuitive awareness that memory is constantly reshaped by the demands of the present. Remembering means renewing in the present the affect that is tied to the image or object; as such these mementoes become aids to mourning. What is lost are the times and the people once bound to the object. (pp. 111-112)

Aids to mourning, indeed, especially because in the possession of such empowering objects one 'can now decide for oneself the object's future and fate' (Korte, 2004, p. 112); and it is this choice which enables mourning to proceed, thereby negating the experience of melancholy as the inability to mourn.

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P— provides strict instructions for our time at the house. We are not to stay overnight at the house. Children are not to be in the house. We are to report any discovery of money or items we recognise as having potential significant financial value. We are not to disturb the shell collection.

Joyce was a fervent seashell collector from 1965 until the early 1990s. Until her second divorce in 1989, she collected with her second husband, L—. They travelled together and L— often collected by himself on business trips to far north Queensland, in search of specimens that

washed ashore from the Great Barrier-Reef. Their collecting activities centred on the mid-north coast of New South Wales, an ideal location for beach combing because of the way sea currents from the north and south converge along that stretch of coastline. The collection also features internationally acquired specimens from Oceania, Southeast Asia and the Americas, with some shells provided by friends and others purchased from private collections. Joyce was a rigorous seashell researcher and record-keeper, and an expert in shell preservation techniques. The result of her devotion is a world-class collection of over 30,000 items, a legacy of not only Joyce's constancy to her task but an exhibition of exquisite marine curios.

I write something similar to the above for the Deed of Gift for the local museum, but I exclude the references to L—. Her collection is housed in cabinets – the 'cabinets of curiosity' reverberate loudly in this place – in the loungeroom, the spare room upstairs, and several thousand are in old margarine containers and a chest of drawers in the attic. Each bagged and tagged, like cadavers. She also kept painstaking records that document the scientific name of each shell, where it was collected, when, and by whom. Her index cards are personalised. All this will be donated to the shire museum once the legalities are sorted out, permitting professional contractors to enter the property, deconstruct the cabinets, package the shells and transport them to their new location where they will be cleaned, categorised and mounted for exhibition.

The Deed of Gift description of provenance needs an accompanying photograph of Joyce for display purposes, so when I sort through the study I fish out the photo albums and loose stacks of photos, plus those stashed between torn-up magazines and tourist brochures perfectly preserved from the eighties – 'come and enjoy the wonder of the Big Pineapple' where, apparently, one can discover plenty of big perms on display among the clientele. It's a digression in my sorting task but I almost want to keep these brochures, at least to pass them on to an historical society or a nineteen eighties appreciation group, which I'm sure exists somewhere online. Stay on task, Ross.

Family photos.

There are a few of Joyce, but none of her on the beach, collecting shells. There are only photos of L— collecting. Joyce must have been the one behind the camera, up on the foreshore or sand dune, L— squinting towards the lens. I'm tempted to provide one of these to the museum because Joyce's story is there, not as subject but as composer. Does this tell us something about her love for him? L— forever in focus. Or does it indicate Joyce's need to maintain control? She has directed him where to stand, how to position his head, the angle of his lean and round-shouldered body. How to play his collector's hand. Joyce is director. He is in her command as she speaks down to him. She did that a lot. I can still hear the crack of her voice as she reprimanded him in front of us kids for spending too much time teaching us how to catch fish in the estuary. He was, after all, not our grandfather. He was my father's stepfather. Apparently, we should have been spending more time with her, not L—, who told jokes and took us swimming and taught my eldest brother how to drive an old army jeep. When Joyce made us cry, he'd come into the bedroom and close the door and tell us that it wasn't our fault and that we were good kids. 'Don't worry about her, she's just like that sometimes.' Writing this almost

makes me cry all over again and I half expect L— to walk through the door and reassure me that none of this is my fault, that she died a lonely woman not because I didn't visit or call enough but because of her remarkable ability to pull people close only as a manoeuvre to better shove them away. These days, she would be diagnosed and medicated for a mental illness…

I find photos interleaved with easily discarded piles of paper. It's a confusion of recyclables and memorabilia that must be salvaged. The higgledy-piggledy of it suggests an episode of rage, explained by the fact that most of these photos are of my father's father. Grandad Watkins. Grandad left when my father was two, the trio reduced to a pair, and Joyce prohibited him from seeing my dad. I look at the photos of Grandad and see my father's smile, the shape of my nephew's face, something of my own youngest son, and I am filled with maybes. Maybe if she had been properly treated when she admitted herself for psychiatric assessment as a young woman, then none of the trauma would have occurred. Maybe my grandfather wouldn't have left her, and maybe my father would not have died so young and so sadly.

A knotty word is *maybe*. Its speculation is too much to bear.

*

Belk states that 'collecting is the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences' (1995, p. 67). Collectors, Belk suggests, 'create, combine, classify, and curate the objects they acquire in such away [sic] that a new product, the collection, emerges. In this process they also produce meaning' (1995, p. 55). In the context of collecting, objects 'mirror' the self, not simply through what they imply of the collector's 'taste' (Elsner & Cardinal, 1994, p. 3) but, as Baudrillard suggests, via their 'abstractive operation' to subjectivity: 'while the object is a resistant material body, it is also, simultaneously, a mental realm over which I hold sway, a thing whose meaning is governed by myself alone. It is all my own, the object of my passion' (1994, p. 7). Walter Benjamin also contributes to this topic: 'ownership is the most intimate relationship one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them' (as cited in Schor, 1994, p. 254). In accordance with Korte's suggestion that objects function as substitutes for absence and are material proof of existence (2004, p. 111), Belk suggests that collecting is a means of 'compensatory security-seeking' during grief, where objects become depositories of affection and pleasure (1995, pp. 144-146). In all of these interrelated points on collecting may be seen the recurring language of melancholy at play: language signifying the relationship between physical and metaphysical possession, and lack, loss or absence by implication. The motivations of the melancholic and the collector are thus akin: each desirous of that which they do not hold. Yet, as Mieke Bal suggests, if 'completion is possible, perfection is dangerous'; in other words, the collector, like the melancholic, experiences pleasure in the process and will often extend the boundaries of their collection such that, other than unforeseeable contingencies, a finite 'end' is impossible (1994, p. 113).

In *Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting*, narratologist Bal presents a unique theoretical approach to collecting in that she is chiefly concerned with arriving at an

understanding of the nature of collecting through the application of narratological concepts of 'fabula'. In her essay, Bal discusses the motivational aspects of collectors and the inherent narrativity of objects:

> The potential inwardness of objects is one of their most powerful characteristics, ambiguous and elusive though it may be. Objects hang before the eyes of the imagination, continuously re-presenting ourselves to ourselves, and telling the stories of our lives in ways which would be impossible otherwise… According to this statement, collecting is an essential human feature that originates in the need to tell stories, but for which there are neither words nor other conventional narrative modes. (Bal, 1994, p. 103)

I cannot agree more when Bal concludes: 'collecting is a story'.

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The next time we make the trip back to Joyce's house, we take the kids. Five kids between two brothers, ranging eight years of age to seventeen. We barricade the shell collection from curious and fumbling hands, and the knock and crunch of running feet. The kids play games in the house. Hide and seek. Tiggy. They lounge around on Joyce's sofas and spread their books and phones and skateboards and clothes across the sunroom and loungeroom. One sleeps on her La-Z-boy electric armchair until we source another mattress. They beat a path from the back door to the back gate and explore the foreshore. They find a tree where they can sit and tap into wi-fi from the caravan park so they call it the Internet Tree. They go there to download new games and stream videos and listen to music. They slide down the hill after the rain and their swimmers turn green and brown. Then, on the way back from a beach jaunt, F— tells us that the lady who died whose house it is came and spoke to him.

'She said to make sure the plants in the back yard go to good homes,' he says. 'Because she loved those plants. And she's living in that room up there –' he points to the bar area, 'so don't go in there. She wants to be left alone.' The bar is decrepit. It's a very small area that was once part of the kitchen in the original configuration prior to the renovations in the mid-eighties. The room fits an old Kelvinator, sink, shelving unit for drinking glasses, and one human. From the state of the room, it looks as though it hasn't been used since the late eighties, after L— left her. She was in hospital when he left – it said so in one of her diaries; hospitalised due to chest pain and dizziness. Her mother had died a week beforehand so I can't help wondering if she mistook her symptoms when it was really grief for the mother who told Joyce she was selfish and that she would never speak to her again. L— was in Townsville for work when Nanna Cairns died. It Christmas Eve, 1989. Earlier that day, he called to tell Joyce he loved her. She wrote this fact in her diary, 'L— called to say he loves me!', so I surmise that such a pronouncement must have been a rarity.

On Christmas Eve, 1989, my nine-year-old eyes desperately wanted to close for the night – the fastest way to make it Christmas morning already – but I convinced myself to stay up to witness Mum glide into my room, spirit-like, and fill my stocking slung over the bed knob. But it didn't

happen that way. It happened this way: the phone rang in the hallway; my dad answered it, naked, but dressed in his gruff voice because only suspicious people called so late at night on Christmas Eve – or my aunty after a few too many drinks; he said a few words, then hung up; my mum asked who it was and why they were calling so late; then Dad, sobbing. A new sound to me – my dad crying so much and with such heart. Nanna Cairns had raised him. Because his own mother couldn't bear to.

Then, on 28 December, the day of the funeral, an earthquake struck Newcastle. The funeral was in Newcastle. How fitting.

A few days after that, L— rang again, this time to tell Joyce he hated her and that he wanted a divorce. I wonder if she emptied the bar when she came home from the hospital to find the house emptied of all valuables L— claimed were his – original paintings, furniture, other things itemised in the divorce documents. Yet, as we move our way from room to room, sorting and filtering, claiming and discarding, we find plenty of possessions that were his – bibles, chemistry books, family photo albums, personalised stationery, receipts and hand-written notes. Among other items.

The night F— tells us about his conversing with the dead, we're sleeping in the study and I have a genuinely terrifying dream. F— and I are walking along the beach not far from the house. We're heading south into the wind. Soon, a figure comes whirling towards us at rapid pace along the shoreline. She is fury. She is black smoke and unfurling ribbons and a livid face. She wants my little boy. F— cowers from what he knows is coming – what I can only describe as an attempted possession. I stand between the two of them and yell into her face that she cannot have him, that she must leave him out of this, he has nothing to do with this. And she does. She turns and diminishes southwards. And I wake.

That's the best I can do to describe that dream. Otherwise, words fail me. Words, words, words… I wake in the blackness and recall where I am, courtesy of the stench of damp carpet and dust – an entire fleet of dust mites must have colonised this room, then procreated – and when I calm my heartrate and tell myself she's not here, not anymore, she can't take the boy and she can't do anything to me for going through her objects, lobbing much of it into the skip bin, gifting boxes of consumables to her despised neighbours, hauling box after box to charity, cursing her for not dealing with any of this over the past thirty years or more, just piling up more and more *things*, and me telling my kids to think about this experience as a lesson in considering others late in life, my resentment as inflamed as my fingers are ingrained with the dirt and dust and grime of it all – even though I reassure myself of all this, I know she is here, in the room with me. She is in my blood, my memories, and now I have written her back into the world in this very work of authorship.

F— is eight. He's either very inventive or possesses an ability to speak to the dead – we're truly not sure. Either way, we all avoid the bar area where, apparently, her spirit rests.

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One does not have to discard the object – empowerment exists in the very possibility. Gibson quotes Hawkins and Muecke, who write: 'Getting rid of things is one of our most quotidian experiences of loss. Expelling and discarding is more than biological necessity – it is fundamental to the ordering of the self' (2008, p. 14). However, there are further complexities in this choice, as Gibson explains in relation to the quick or untimely discarding of objects: 'By repeating the experience of loss, by making objects go away through their own volition, they indirectly and symbolically enact death and what it brings – loss and disappearance' (2008, pp. 17-18).

In Gail Jones's *Black Mirror* (2002), a fiction novel about the intersecting private histories of dying artist Victoria Morrell and commissioned biographer Anna Griffin, concepts relative to the narrativity of objects are illustrated particularly in relation to the difficulties of Victoria's forced revisiting of the past: 'How can she speak her own life when so much exists as unspeakable images, wound filmic and narcissistic in this old, old head? Her past is not another country. It is her homeland of lost things' (Jones, 2002, p. 8). Discarding is a particularly important feature of one of Victoria's memories, where she had dived into the Seine to rescue what she believed to be a child bundled in a tartan rug, but turned out to be the material possessions – clothes, books – of a man in the French Resistance – a 'hero' tortured by Nazis – his widow casting off the objects for what they signified in his absolute absence: 'His body had not been recovered. It was burned somewhere. Gone. I threw away his things, she said, because their existence appalled me. I could not sell them or give them away; I just wanted to fling them where they would be lost' (Jones, 2002, p. 14). What is more powerful? That which is forgotten or no longer in possession (absence), or that which is remembered (a kind of presence and possession)? Jones explores these themes in relation to Anna's memories of rabbit-skinning with her father: 'Vanished things, [Victoria] proclaims, are the basis of all art. Yet Anna secretly disagrees. It is presence she finds entirely compelling. The red bodies of skinned rabbits: their absoluteness, their quiddity. The memory of blood on her fingertips' (2002, p. 33). Discarding, whether material or memory objects, can be thought of as either self-empowering and defining of the present, or circular due to the past revisited and loss compounded.

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The most devastating discovery is that all these revelations come far too late. My father sometimes talked about his childhood things he wanted back. 'I know they're there, somewhere in that house,' he'd say. He was right. My grandmother kept his favourite books he read as a boy, his toys, his birthday cards from his first candle to when she decided she could not be a mother to him any longer – not, at least, in the way he needed a mother. His first handwriting. His clothes. He would've laughed at these, cried with the freshness of old memories returned. He might have felt more loved by her. He might not have taken to drinking so much. He might not have died before her.

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In *12 Edmondstone Street* (1985), David Malouf describes the objects children first encounter in their household as symbols of the unknown – we are 'set loose in a world of *things*', and without an ability to name such things at first our only tool to exert power over these objects is the body, as we 'try to swallow them, then to smash them to smithereens' (Malouf, 1985, p. 9). 'It drives us to fury,' he remarks (Malouf, 1985, p. 9). A young child tests their own physical boundaries as they pick up the oversized wooden letter from the alphabetic pile on the carpet, mouthing it with pink gums and nascent teeth, testing it with the tongue, a haptic event that proves the substance of the object, its acute angles and solidity confirming its otherness, as well as proving the child's own substance. The child might then let the wooden letter clatter back onto the pile before picking up another object – a plastic figurine or a rattle, an instrument that makes a noise – and hit the pile of wooden letters to test the give and take of the two objects, the floor, their hand. Without the ability to wield linguistic instruments, Malouf seems to be suggesting, we test the physical qualities of such objects because of their difference and indifference to us, and in this way they become significant in identity formation. As constituents of a household, Malouf emphasises the importance of objects (these 'things') in a child's comprehension of what is other, which develops a child's sense of their own mortal object-ness. Given time, they are incorporated into the stories of ourselves, our subjective past, when:

> we perceive at last that in naming and handling things we have power over them. If they refuse to yield their history to us they may at least, in time, become agents in ours. This is the process of our first and deepest education. A 'secret machinery' gets to work in us, 'a hidden industry of the senses and the spirit' whose busy handling and hearing and overhearing is our second birth into the world – into that particular embodiment of it that is a household and a house. (Malouf, 1985, pp. 9-10)

But objects go beyond becoming mere 'agents' in the narratives of our lives. As rendered *things* – selected, curated, labelled and preserved in our minds and on the pages of our books, these objects undergo a horror just as brutal as Malouf's metaphors of consumption and demolition. Objects become us, just as we become objects in death. This holds true in both life and death – perhaps even more apparent in death, when our objects, and thereby ourselves, must be subjectively 'inventorized' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 11), collected or discarded by those who grieve.

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There is a locked room at the front of the house with a note attached to the door forbidding the cleaners to go inside. We do. And inside is a recreation of Joyce's mother's bedroom – Nanna Cairns's wardrobes filled with her clothes on hangers, mothballed to asphyxiation, her queen-sized bed neatly made, and a dresser full of scarves and handkerchiefs, hats, gloves, millinery tools and jewellery. A museum within a house. A dedication to the mother who rejected her. An inexplicable devotion. Yet it does make sense – this need to preserve. I understand this because I share that familial bone. Because, just as my grandmother chose to build a shrine within the confines of her home, I, too, have built my memorial – furnishing this very page with objects of my own dead.

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Research Statement

Research background

Kristeva (1989) posits that melancholy – an experience of object loss – is a language requiring learning in order for this state of being to be understood, and that we look toward the imagination and the construction of signs to fill the void and make meaning. The conceptual space where creative practice overlaps with grief studies, particularly regarding the affective power of what Gibson (2004) terms 'melancholy objects', and the function of writing in expounding that grief, is an underrepresented scholarly field. This work thus asks: What new insights can be arrived at through a fictocritical account of the struggle to come to terms with a lived experience of grief, that interrogates the act of writing about melancholy objects while embedding theoretical dialogues on these very topics?

Research contribution

This work traces theoretical intersections of the cultural significance of objects, collecting, and human experience in the aftermath of death. The work merges these academic dialogues with the author's own experience of writing about melancholy objects to understand and move through grief. By plaiting threads of memoir, critical self-reflexivity and traditional scholarly modes of discourse, the work exhibits and appraises theoretical questions about the connections between creative practice, grief studies and Object theory.

Research significance

This work provides an innovative, fictocritical contribution to scholarship concerned with exploring creative writing in relation to grief studies and Object theory. It builds upon the author's established publication portfolio of scholarly (Watkins 2014, 2016) and trade publication (2016) exploring writing in relation to melancholy as a phenomenon associated with object loss. This work thus forms an extension of that portfolio in a mode that implicitly and explicitly explores its conceptual focus. It is published in *TEXT*, a leading academic journal in the field of creative writing.