Salvage rites: making memory on a Montana homestead

Thesis

How to cite:

© 2005 The Author

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.0000e8cf

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk
Salvage rites: 
making memory 
on a Montana homestead

Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Geography Discipline
Faculty of Social Sciences
Open University

Caitlin O’Brian DeSilvey
BA, MSc

10 December 2004
There in the chilly and small dust which is beneath porches, the subtle funnels of doodlebugs whose teasing, of a broomstraw, is one of the patient absorptions of kneeling childhood, and there, in that dust and the damper dusts and the dirt, dead twigs of living, swept from the urgent tree, signs, and relics: bent nails, withered and knobbed with rust; a bone button, its two eyes torn to one; the pierced back of an alarm clock, greasy to the touch; a torn fragment of a pictured print; an empty and flattened twenty-gauge shotgun shell, its metal green lettering still visible; the white tin eyelet of a summer shoe...

James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941)

What to say
these days
of crashing disjunct,
whine, of separation—

Not abstract—
“God’s will,” not
lost in clouds this
experienced wisdom

Hand and mind
and heart one
ground to walk on,
field to plow.

*I know
a story
I can tell
and will.*

## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prologue: Poking the corners</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Among other things</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Odds and ends</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Inventory and intervention</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Once bitten</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Recollections</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Fence-post Fordism</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Making use of things</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Synchronic handiwork</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Memory’s ecologies</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. One morning</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Object lessons</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postscript: After-image</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Inventory (CD)</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT
Salvage rites: making memory on a Montana homestead

The preservation of selected sites and artefacts privileges certain forms of cultural memory. Other material cultures, no longer useful and deemed unworthy of preservation, accumulate in overlooked places. Abandoned in a state of unfinished disposal, these objects and structures can generate unpredictable and unruly effects. Such degraded materialities may trigger apprehensions of cultural memory in a mode unfamiliar to the museum or the heritage park. This study takes up the residual material culture of a homestead in Western Montana to explore how history and memory are made, and remade, through interactions between people and things. Theories of performativity and inter-subjectivity inform a move away from a broadly representational or semiotic understanding of material culture. In this study, experimental methodologies access the different ways in which material engagements animate the potential effects of a given artefact. One approach explores the potential for inclusive, artful inventory practice. Another engages in a process of associative storytelling which assembles disparate objects in constellations of meaning. A third approach observes the way in which sensory or haptic memory arises out of embodied action and practical reclamation. Finally, the thesis considers the nature of cultural memory and the processes of decay that obscure certain residues of knowledge even as they expose others. In conclusion, the thesis considers the social and political implications of such non-essentialist encounters with memory and materiality. The thesis argues that these active, creative encounters with objects open up the possibility for an ethical relation to the past—a salvage both of cultural artefacts and of overlooked histories.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As Walt Whitman once crowed, 'I am multitudes'. The production of this thesis involved my multitudes in many ways, but a few people deserve particular thanks. Bob Oaks steered the homestead into a safe berth for the duration of this project and then challenged me (lovingly) to come up with something worthwhile to say about what I found there. My sister Sarah taught me how to ask many of the questions that I try to answer here. The people who gathered around the orchard picnic table all contributed something: special appreciation is due to Molly Moody and Jo Bernofsky. The Verworn family and Ione Randolph King gifted me with their recollections (if I got it wrong in places, only I am to blame for this). In the UK, Gillian Rose and Nigel Clark offered critical insight, moral support, and friendship in just the right doses. The Open University Geography discipline turned out to be the perfect home for this slightly oddball research, and I'm grateful to fellow students (including the Number 10 clan) and staff for their part in stirring up and clarifying the ideas that I work through here. The thesis also picks up on unfinished conversations (may they never end!) with a few kindred spirits, among them Peter Hallward, Tim Edensor, Kerri Rosenstein, Mike Gallagher, Kathryn Yusoff, and Russell Johnston (ever the macro to my micro, and much loved for it). And a final measure of gratitude goes to my parents, who never discouraged me from poking in the rubble.
...And if, here,
we must face the falling profit, the new way
apples are preserved, the failure of the railroad,
we should also know the vital way birds locate orchards,
we should also fly the stale air of our tiny cell,
poking the corners light ignores. The poor
feed well on those discarded planets they explore.

Richard Hugo
Ode to the Trio Fruit Company of Missoula (1975)

PROLOGUE
Poking the corners

In September 1997 I received a call from a friend who worked in the planning department
for the city of Missoula, Montana. An orchard at an uninhabited homestead in the hills north of
town needed gleaning. The friend wanted to know if I could round up volunteers to pick the apples
and deliver the harvest to the local food bank. A few days later, a group of us gathered with a
convoy of pickup trucks to make the trip out of town. The route to the homestead took us past the
entrance to the city landfill and up an unpaved road between overgrazed hill pastures. A few cows
eyed us as we drove by in a cloud of dust. At a fork in the road, we turned up a narrow gully along a
single track lane. The lane passed through a thicket of wild plum trees into a clearing, where we
parked the trucks next to a dilapidated shack and a crude corral. A weather-beaten barn slumped
into the hillside above us, hemmed in by a scribble of fences. The orchard of untamed apple trees
we had come to glean rose below the barn on a shallow skirt of land. Beyond, the bleached hills
fanned out into a wide bowl rimmed by a horizon of bare ridgelines.

As we worked in the orchard, my eye kept wandering to take in details: a glimpse of shingled
roofline, a snarl of rusty implements caught in a stand of trees, a depression in the orchard grass
where a deer had lain. Up in a tree to shake the fruit off the limbs, I could see the shape of the
property more plainly. The barn—a ramshackle patchwork of a building with uneven window holes
and a drunken roofline—held the northern border of the property, beyond which lay the house and
outbuildings of a neighbouring ranch. The barnyard and orchard graded down to the gully bottom
where we had left the trucks, and where several other structures poked out among heaps of scrap
lumber and clumps of shaggy plum and box elder trees. To the south, the land rose slightly to a
bench where a strange silver-sided building set between two open fields. It appeared as if the place had been abandoned for decades.

Before we hauled the harvest down the hill, we split up to explore the property a bit. I returned to the shack in the centre of the clearing. Nails in the mismatched siding hung a collage of stencils, horseshoes, screens, license plates, sawblades, and unidentifiable metal scraps. The roof at one end of the shack sagged under a weight of fallen tree limbs and a few heavy tire rims, apparently tossed on to anchor pieces of corrugated tin over the rotten shingles. At the other end of the building, a tree rooted under the foundationless sill held a wall upright, if not exactly plumb. When I looked through a gap in the door I saw saplings sprouting between the decaying floorboards. A sign on the end of a workbench gestured—"No loafing in shop"—towards some extinguished industry. I thought I could make out a beekeeper's hat among the dingy litter on the workbench top.

The smaller sheds nearby stood at various angles of precarious repose. Gaping doors revealed snarls of rope and burlap, rotten leather and feed sacks. A jumble of splintered lumber, scrap iron, steel drums and coils of barbed wire scattered about on the weedy ground between the buildings. A lurid green shag carpet, draped over an abandoned plough, had begun to grow a layer of moss among its synthetic fibres. Nearby, an iron wheel rim fused into the woody flesh of a low-
hanging branch. Beyond the clutch of sheds, the ground dipped into a hollow where a one story gable-roofed farmhouse set against a hillside in a hedge of bushy lilacs. I approached the house through a gate made out of an iron bedstead, its decorative knobs hung with a tangle of baling twine. Through the grimy windows I could make out a pile of work boots and scattered containers, a cupboard with its doors swung wide open, a slack-bodied ghost in a moth-eaten wool coat. A faint path carried around behind the house, where a red door set into wall of loose stone against the hillside. Across the dirt drive another leaning shed—with a roof cobbled together out of pressed tin ornamental ceiling panels—housed a giant winch, a thick rope still coiled on the mechanism. Material residues of dwelling and working layered the place, piled up in its heaps and hollows, spilled out of the scrappy buildings. I found myself snagged, drawn to the ramshackle farm by an attraction I couldn’t name.

Although the place lay less than two miles from downtown Missoula, it seemed remarkably isolated. In fact, the fate of this derelict settlement was tightly linked to the changing fortunes of the growing city over the hill. Missoula lies on the western flank of the Rocky Mountains in a broad valley formed by the confluence of the Clark Fork and Bitterroot rivers. The city developed around the railroad: timber from the mountains and produce from the fertile river plain shipped out to Montana’s boomtown mining settlements, and beyond to out-of-state markets. The traditional industries began a slow decline after the Second World War, though the presence of the state university and business associated with the regional service economy balanced out the losses somewhat. If you could ignore the sulphur stench belched out by the cardboard plant in the winter, Missoula was a pleasant enough place to live and the population gradually rose over the second half
of the twentieth century to about 60,000 by 1990.

By the middle of the 1990s, however, it was clear that the pace of growth had accelerated. A tide of starter mansions rose into the foothills on the south side of town; a sprawling commercial strip had begun to colonise the open fields to the west. In 1995, Missoula citizens passed a $5 million ‘open space’ bond to fund the creation of a network of public conservation and recreation lands in the valley and the nearby foothills. A 470-acre parcel of grassy slopes and wildflower-speckled ridgelines immediately north of the city—a favourite haunt for dog walkers, hill runners, and the occasional herd of winter elk—entered public ownership in 1996. In the far northwest corner of the property sat the dilapidated homestead (hidden under the star-spangled flag corner in the 1939 map below).

Bill Randolph, Jr., a bachelor who inherited the property from his parents in the 1950s, had been the last inhabitant of the homestead. For close to forty years Bill lived in the silver-sided ranch house and left the dozen or so other dwellings and outbuildings to their own devices. In 1993, a local land trust convinced him to restrict development on part of the family property with a conservation easement. When Randolph died two years later, the City open space program approached his nieces with a purchase offer for the entire parcel. The homestead property was in limbo when I became aware of the site. City officials planned to place further easements to ensure public trail access before they resold to recoup some of the purchase expense. The City’s historic preservation officer, Alan Mathews, had been up to salvage a few items from the farmhouse attic—
a child's diary, some books, an antique camera—but, in his assessment, the neglected farmstead
didn't merit the investment that would be required for stabilisation and preservation.¹

Not at all sure what I was getting myself into, and qualified only by my interest, I offered to
carry on with the salvage of the homestead's artefacts. Mathews gave me permission to rummage
through the structures and inventory anything of worth that I found there, but I knew (and I think
he did too) that the inventory was only pretext for my exploration. As a precaution against the
rodent-borne *bantavirus*, Mathews instructed me to wear a respirator and carry a bottle of diluted
bleach. Otherwise, I was on my own. When I went to the Parks and Recreation Department to
fetch the key to the padlocks the City had set on all the buildings, the woman at the desk couldn't
find it. They lent me a pair of municipal bolt-cutters and I snipped all the locks.

Behind the doors, it appeared as if a century’s worth of debris had been casually stirred with
a giant spoon. In the former farmhouse, a drift of clothes, magazines, tin cans, broken chairs,
bedsprings and bottles covered the warped floorboards. Strips of rotten paper and
cobwebs hung down from the kitchen ceiling,
and the outer wall bulged inwards with the
weight of the slumped hill behind it. A badger
appeared to have taken up residence in the
cookstove, though stacks of pots and pans still teetered on top. Above the stove, a battered hat
hung on a hook fashioned from a mule deer antler. In the pantry, shelves sagged under the weight
of cloudy jars and rusty tins. A stale odour—part rodent urine, part earthy rot—permeated the
close rooms. In the corner of a dim back bedroom (on a trunk which held the musty volumes of
the 1894 *Encyclopædia Britannica*) I picked up a small square jar of amber glass and tipped its
contents into my hand: a pencil stub, a key, a razor blade, a stone, a shell, two marbles. The pencil
stub seemed impossibly tiny, an artefact of an alien frugality.

The other structures had shrugged off their previous functions to become storage sheds for
everyday excess. Newer strata (dog food bags, plastic buckets, cereal boxes) overlaid deposits of
older material (disintegrating clothing, wooden chests, broken tools). A tattered deposit of printed

matter folded through everything, casting out references that invariably ended in a torn page, an illegible bit of text. A cowboy costume box called up the spectre of the fabled West while a shed full of split and rotten saddles signalled to a grittier actuality. Things gestured toward obsolete tasks and skills, the objects scarred with their former uses: egg-boxes, irons, halters, horseshoes, bushel baskets, post-hole diggers, drills, brooms. Recipe clippings, records and receipts clogged shelves and drawers. Rodents, moulds, insects and other organisms, long accustomed to being left alone, had colonised the residual matter. Packrat middens crowded the attic corners with pyramids of shredded text and stolen spoons. Hoardings deposited by humans and animals mingled indistinguishably—sacks of feathers, wool-stuffed baskets, cans of plum pits, jars of seeds. The objects seemed caught up in tangled after-lives.

Uncertain about what to recover from the clutter, I left most of the things where they lay. Instead of hauling the objects away, I took photographs. A cowbell dangling against a weathered wall, blue sky where the ceiling of the room should be. The twisted beauty of the winch shed, slowing easing itself into the ground. A mirror hanging in a dim green room next to a few numbered ear tags. Lichen scabs on a on a ring of pitted steel.

On one trip, a friend and I found a brown paper bag under a sheet of tin. I pulled out an Old Crow whisky bottle and a few scraps of paper. A Missoula Mercantile bill (for a purchase of 900 pounds of wheat, one lantern, and six glasses in July 1944) carried a barely decipherable pencil-
scrawled note on the back:

I have 414 acres which I have put up 80 tons of hay. And plenty of pasture for my 30 head of dairy cattle. I raised 400 early spring pullets they will start laying the last of Aug. I have sold 50 doz. eggs a week since the first of Feb. I raised a surplus of garden and potatoes to sell. I had a big crop of raspberry and cherries to sell. There will be 50 or 60 boxes of apples to sell. I took about 800 lb. of honey from 10 hives of bees.

The note, signed Wm Randolph, recalled active networks of labour and exchange utterly at odds with the state of dereliction the place had slipped into. The apples I could imagine. The rest of it was more difficult to conjure up. The hay pastures were now weedy expanses of knapweed and leafy spurge. The milking stalls in the barn and the nest boxes in the chicken coops were long forsaken. Only a few straggly rhubarb plants grew along a fenceline where the garden might have been. In the ranch house on the bench I found traces of William’s son’s solitary life: a few rooms stained with coal dust, his things still arranged in the bathroom, a threadbare pair of overalls hung on the kitchen wall next to the stopped clock.

I later discovered that Bill’s relatives had worked through the clutter to rescue valuables and clean up the mess before they passed the keys over to the City. Truckloads of debris ended up down the road at the landfill.

A collection of family documents, furniture, and other items travelled to Bill’s niece’s house. Only the dregs remained, memory materialised in shards. Indistinct histories radiated out of these scraps. The concentration of cultural fragments seemed to reflect an odd blend of austerity and acquisitiveness—an overlay where elements of Depression-era scarcity (I think of the impoverished Alabama sharecropper shacks documented by James Agee and Walker Evans in the 1930s) combined with the excesses of consumer society (my grandmother’s suburban attic in upstate New York comes to mind). An American vernacular ruin, the homestead’s structures and scrap heaps contained an ‘effusion of objects: domestic, mystical, decayed…a reversed vortex, spinning time backwards’. Chance and poverty had preserved a collection of shabby things that seemed to speak to stories both deeply familiar and entirely unknown.

---

It is easier to ignore the past, or to deny that it has meaning for the present and the future, than to be confronted with the unclear composite in which an approximation of the truth shifts and moves in time. Everywhere the Montanan is surrounded by his [sic] real heritage. Almost nowhere will he recognize it.

K Ross Toole
*Montana: An Uncommon Land* (1959)

How will she transcribe a work whose essence is to remain unfinished, incomplete, abandoned?

Iain Sinclair
*Radinzky's Room* (1999)

CHAPTER ONE

Among other things

Wasting away

The story begins in the strata of lost things, a melancholy materiality composed of the worn-out artefacts of a worn-out way of living. The homestead's musty corners held a fraction of the materials a few Montana farm families used and discarded in the course of their lives, remainders from the everyday business of survival. When I first encountered the things, they had been triply rejected: first by their initial users, then by the family's retrieval efforts, and, finally, by the City's historic preservation officer. I invited a few professionals up to the homestead to offer their advice after I'd begun to investigate the contents of the buildings. The state university's lead archivist took one look at the clutter and reached for a black plastic sack. The curator from the local historical museum refused to touch the documents and artefacts for fear of spreading their moulds to her collection. Mired in low-ebb decay, the things were effectively waste, surplus to the requirements of the gatekeepers of history. According to prevailing codes of conservation, the things belonged at the landfill down the road.

The rejection of the homestead's material culture discloses some of the boundaries that distinguish legitimate heritage sites from their illegitimate cousins. While certain places (and artefacts) gain recognition as elements of the public heritage, other places linger at the margins of collective awareness—overlooked, if not entirely forgotten.\(^1\) In America (as in most Western

---

nations) locations associated with national origin myths, pivotal historical events, and idealised folk traditions tend to draw disproportionate amounts of attention and investment. Preservation and restoration activities establish material referents for selected strains of memory. A derelict farm at the urban fringe, overlaid with the degraded residual matter of hardscrabble agricultural and domestic labour, lay low on the priority list for the allocation of limited preservation resources—too young to fit into Montana's frontier mythology and too marginal to qualify as an illustration of the twentieth-century everyday. The homestead and its objects fell into a category of disposable heritage, unauthorised and unclaimed by institutions of public culture.

As with most sites of this ilk, however, the act of disposal remained unfinished. The things in the sheds and shacks, far from slipping into oblivion, continued to cast off a welter of unpredictable effects. Scrawled notes on weathered walls, heaps of disintegrating matter, idiosyncratic stashes of personal belongings—the homestead's materiality provoked peculiar apprehensions of cultural antecedents and obsolete experience. Tattered newspapers and documents presented indecipherable footnotes to former political and economic orders. The presence of human bodies lingered in the worn forms of abandoned work boots, or in the faint

---

outline of the path that led from the farmhouse to the root cellar door. Fragmented remains
gestured toward other presences: the severed leg of a small deer, a pair of badger paws tacked
above a door lintel. With only a sketchy history to frame my understanding, the homestead’s
remnants sent my imagination spinning out speculative associations.

An ‘excess of meaning and matter’, Tim Edensor observes, can inhere in the ruins of
formerly productive sites. Excess, in this instance, refers both to the sheer proliferation of stuff in
these locations and to the way in which the residual materiality exceeds familiar patterns of
historical narration. Arbitrary juxtapositions and unnerving survivals thwart attempts to ‘make
sense’ of the disordered deposits or fit them into a plausible sequence of events. The inarticulate
sensations and disjointed insights triggered by

As I moved around the homestead, the fragile significance of the objects I encountered
seemed to be bound up in their ‘secret affinities’ with adjacent things, and their contingent relation
to the places where they lay discarded. After one early visit, I noted in my journal a collection of
household items on the peeling wall behind the farmhouse’s kitchen sink: a worn hand-saw; a red
and white Hormel Luncheon Meat tin installed as a makeshift shelf (out of which a stained rag

---

3 Ibid.: 48.
dangled forlornly); a cast iron skillet; a jagged fragment of mirror bound to a crude backing of cardboard with a piece of soiled twine; two pairs of tarnished scissors, one splayed open; a white canvas water bag, marked 'Eagle Brand' in faint red lettering, with a coil of wire hung around the cord handle; a bottle-cap opener; two toothbrushes in a splintered wooden holder. The handle of one toothbrush disintegrated when I touched it. The touching, the small act of unintentional destruction, seems prescient now. I found the homestead in a state of unfinished disposal, and I could have left it that way. But I had sensed something I wanted more of, a curious kind of knowledge about the past that worked through the wasted place and its scrappy things.

**Meddling with the midden**

My initial forays into the sheds and cellars were conducted in the spirit of 'salvage archaeology'. The City planned, eventually, to sell the parcel of land where the structures stood. Trail easements would remain on the ridgelines, but ownership of the settled section would pass to a private buyer. My volunteer task involved rescue of any artefacts I deemed worthy—a scaled-down, amateur version of the archaeological surveys routinely conducted just before the bulldozers move in to initiate major road-building and construction projects. The treasures I unearthed from the general mass of litter would join the previously rescued artefacts in a locked storage cage in the basement of City Hall. City officials deemed the ramshackle structures unsalvageable. Worried about their liability should a member of the public happen to stumble under a falling beam or into an overgrown well, a few officials had suggested offering the site to the local fire department for a training exercise. I volunteered to carry on the artefact salvage process fully expecting that the homestead, as I had first encountered it, would be gone within the year.

As I became more familiar with the old ranch, my attraction to the place and its lost things became laced with an impulse to persuade the arbiters of heritage to look again at what they had rejected. Although I sensed this impulse might be in conflict with my solitary explorations, the sideling of my private enthusiasm seemed like a price worth paying for the chance to 'save' the

---

9 Often called 'rescue archaeology' in the UK, salvage archaeology became a major industry in the late twentieth-century in the face of escalating disturbance from development projects and enhanced appreciation for archaeological remains. Brian Jones, *Past Imperfect: The Story of Rescue Archaeology* (London: Heinemann, 1984); Robert Silverberg, *Men against Time: Salvage Archaeology in the U.S.* (New York: Macmillan, 1967). An earlier tradition of 'salvage anthropology' attempted a similar recovery of threatened cultural traditions. As will become clear, my work takes a slightly different approach to the work of salvage.
site from its imminent privatisation and likely destruction. My missions to the homestead (often in the company of friend and co-conspirator, Bob Oaks) began to resemble an odd union of extreme housecleaning and detective work. We burned barrels of mouldy clothes and boxes, shovelled debris out of the buildings, and mobilised a volunteer crew to prune the decadent orchard for the first time in years. The clearing away went hand-in-hand with moments of discovery, leading to an accumulation of details that illuminated homestead’s shadowy past. Cellars and cupboards disclosed mildewed receipts and tax assessments, with documentation of the farm’s former productivity and subsequent decline. Endpapers on mouldy books recorded names of former inhabitants; found notes and letters witnessed affections and aspirations. As our investigations gathered momentum, we interviewed surviving family members, searched the county records for property transfers, and walked the land with neighbours who told stories about moonshine and wildfire.

Gradually, as salvage turned to storytelling, a rough timeline emerged, beginning in a shallow pre-history. Local archaeologists identified the location of a former tribal trade and migration route, which they believed to have been in active use into the middle of the nineteenth century, on the hill just above the homestead gully. The government survey crew sent to parcel the land into 640 acre ‘sections’ in 1870 had marked the trail on their maps as the ‘Old Trail to Walla Walla’ (though it was also known as the ‘Trail to the Buffalo’). Almost twenty years after the surveyors completed their
task, a man named Ray Moon staked a homestead claim on 160 acres in the southwest quarter of section ten, township thirteen north, range nineteen west—the coordinates in Thomas Jefferson's territorial survey grid. Ray and his wife Luella lived on the property from 1889 until 1894, when they testified to have carried out the required 'improvements' to secure title, including construction of a house, a barn, and boundary fencing (as well as the planting of seventy-five fruit trees).

The historical details grew murky after Ray and Luella 'proved up' and sold the homestead to Moon relatives, but snapped into focus in 1907 when the county record office recorded a sale from George C. Moon and Helen Moon to William H. Randolph.

With the tenure of William and Emma Randolph, the story moved from narrow trickle of detail to a much deeper sluice of anecdote and evidence. Bill Randolph, Jr., the elderly bachelor whose death had precipitated the sale of the property to the City, was the youngest of three boys in the Randolph family. His parents moved to the Moon homestead in 1907 with his two older brothers. William's attempts at establishing himself as an inventor and businessman hadn't panned out, and Emma wanted to start a poultry farm. The couple lived on the property for almost fifty years, with their sons and various members of their extended family.

Emma, a Seventh Day Adventist who had trained as a schoolteacher in her youth, 'ruled the roost'; William was a dreamer, often drawn off the farm by his various (invariably unproductive) enterprises. To bring in money, the family sold eggs, vegetables and dairy products to the residents

11 Ray F Moon, Final Certificate #257, Box 991, Patent File, Land Entry Files, Missoula, Montana G.L.O., Record Group #49 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives, 1894). Under the terms of the 1862 Homestead Act, any man or woman could stake a claim to 160 acres of surveyed US territory. Title was granted after successful completion of a five-year 'proving up' tenure.
of the working-class Missoula neighbourhood at the bottom of the hill. They also mined low-grade coal from a seam in the northern hillside. William and Emma died in 1956; Bill Jr. stayed on alone for almost forty years. He tended a few goats, boarded horses, and worked an off-farm job at the local stockyards. With the construction of the interstate in 1966, and the landfill in 1969, the homestead became increasingly isolated from the city in the valley below, even as the city expanded to creep up the foothills.

This patchwork history assembled out of shared recollections and miscellaneous fragments. Bill’s niece, Shirley Verworn (who still lived in the house her father Keith built at the southern corner of the family property in 1936), helped me make sense of the materials I brought down the hill for her to examine, and offered her own memories to fill in the gaps. Later, Shirley’s older sister Ione confirmed these pieces of the story and added her own. The homestead’s corners continued to turn up forgotten traces: a 1905 sketch for William’s ‘mowing machine’ invention; 1930s sales ledgers for the farm’s produce and dairy products; Emma’s recipe for pickled peaches; a letter from a cousin commiserating about the destruction wrought by a 1945 wildfire. We narrated the emerging story on public tours and school field trips, in grants and official appeals.

As a tool for bringing the homestead out of the shadows, the story was extremely effective. The theme of frontier-resourcefulness resonated with the people who visited to learn about the place—many of whom could tell similar stories about their own grandparents. For those with weaker personal connections to Montana’s agricultural past, the story gave witness to an age of simplicity and self-sufficiency, a counterpoint to late twentieth-century excess. In the eyes of the City officials, the place gradually shed its mantle of dereliction and liability. Once minimally tidied and rendered legible through interpretation, the place lost its threat, and even seemed to promise a benign collective appeal. The advocacy efforts drew the homestead from its marginal position into the discursive space of public memory, where it took on a metonymic value as a representative part of a broader historical tradition. In 2000, the City’s Open Space Advisory Committee passed a resolution recognising the Moon-Randolph Homestead as a ‘valuable remnant of the cultural history of the Missoula Valley’. In the same year, the State Historic Preservation Office determined the homestead eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as a
‘landscape of cultural significance’, which marked the provisional recognition of the site as a ‘contributing resource’ to the national storehouse of sanctioned heritage. The narrative prepared for the National Register determination provided the foundation for an illustrated chapbook detailing the history of the property. In autumn of 2000, Bob Oaks’s neighbourhood community development organisation signed a five-year lease to manage the site, with a promise to stabilise selected structures and initiate educational programs.

While I worked with others to fit the homestead into a narrative that would be legible to the institutions that controlled its fate, I also worked to fit the found documents and artefacts into a rudimentary organisational system. Torn papers came to rest in loosely classified files. Cardboard boxes filled with stray objects—food cartons, lone shoes, magazines, squashed hats, jars of nuts and bolts. The homestead’s air of stale chaos dissipated with each object that I recovered and reclaimed. But the more documentation I filed, the more artefacts I photographed and labelled, the more I felt my initial fascination slipping away, the stories narrowing to a foreshortened chronology. The account we constructed established the value of the threatened place, but it also introduced an air of fixity around the homestead’s unruly materiality. As I placed the papers in the vinyl sleeves and the objects in boxes I felt a closure that seemed alien to the expansive response I had experienced upon finding them. Little by little, the excess meaning and matter diminished, and part of me was sad to see it go.

Once upon a time

This sequence of events—from dereliction to incipient preservation—flags some of the practices through which people enlist objects in their attempts to make sense of the past. The

---

12 Open Space Advisory Committee City of Missoula, Recommendation to Retain Randolph Property Fee Simple Ownership (Missoula, Montana, 2000).
discussion to follow only begins to touch on the transformations that take place in the name of heritage and conservation (and, as a result, may exaggerate the power of these discourses to control their objects). In the rest of the thesis, I develop a more nuanced understanding of how material culture contributes to different forms of public remembrance. For now, I set out some general observations so that I can begin to reflect on how certain conventional practices worked through my initial attempts to make sense of the homestead’s materials.

At sites dedicated to the work of heritage, objects—and, indeed, entire landscapes—are expected to serve a largely representational function in the presentation of certain versions of the past. The object acts as a physical referent for a particular event or aspect of experience, and the preservation of that object is expected to stabilise the memory of that event or experience for public consumption—often in relation to a broader historical narrative. In the Northern Rockies, mainstream social remembering tends to focus on late nineteenth-century Anglo mining and ranching history, with proper reverence also accorded to the earlier (and enabling) conquests of the Lewis and Clark expedition. At reconstructed ranches, mining ghost towns, and local museums, an ‘active and deliberate process of materialisation’ works to alter structures and artefacts to create an illusion of stasis—conservation technologies slow or halt physical decay, while interpretive strategies present the objects as elements of a static, unchanging past. Period reconstructions and artefact displays in these places facilitate visual and (less often) tactile encounters with material culture. Although heritage is not always reducible to its intended effects,

---


the forms of cultural memory mobilised by these sites tend to cleave to authorized narratives—if only because the artefacts and traces that might offer another perspective are absent or obscured.17

Management of material remains also occurs in historical archives and stored collections. As conservation devices, archives and collections work to stabilise objects and fit them into a system that renders them legible, and so available for scholarship and instruction.18 A kind of semiotic thinning is necessary in order for an object to behave appropriately in a collection or archive. Previous histories of production, use, and disuse recede as objects enter into the spatial order of the collection.19 As Alan Radley remarks, “These material displacements, either by accident or design… produce the object as a “memento”, a “historic artefact” with which to define the world of which it was a part rather than (as before) through which to achieve ends within a particular space and time.”20 Ephemeral things, decontextualised and catalogued, acquire a ‘socially produced durability’ in carefully monitored environments.21

As our preservation activities at the homestead gathered pace, we drew on these discourses of narration, display, and collection to structure our work. The revaluation of the homestead involved the conscription of objects as evidence; the story we constructed began to discipline the objects’ contingent memory traces and replace them with a ‘once upon a time’ of hard work, frugality, and self-reliance.22 We emploted the material in a story that fit (albeit quirkily) within the recognisable narrative structures of Rocky Mountain heritage—determined homesteaders and smallholders set their will against the harsh, but ultimately, yielding landscape to carve out the American dream of private property and moderate prosperity. The story smoothed over the rough edges, sanitised the detritus for public consumption, and set the things safely on the other side of

22 Bennett, 156.
an invisible line in a past severed from the concerns of the present.\textsuperscript{23} In the sense that we succeeded in gaining recognition for the site, we worked a successful transformation of waste into heritage. In another sense, however, the situation was much more complicated.

My amateur collecting practice set out to turn the homestead’s mass of unruly matter into an array of obedient artefacts. Initially, when most of the objects I placed in the archive related to the emerging storyline, this seemed to be working (though I mentioned the curious sense of loss that I felt when the objects slipped into the files and the boxes). I soon realised, however, that only a fraction of the things we found fed into the narrative. While some of the objects were willing to offer themselves as illustration in the scripted story, most of the things had other designs. What was I to do with a pink paper napkin, partly consumed by rodents, on which someone had recorded the names of the people who attended a picnic up Nine Mile Creek one summer afternoon? A cedar shingle scrawled with calculations? A Godiva chocolate box holding a few desiccated flowers and a lock of human hair? Other objects—lace collars stained with mouse urine, rolls of paper fused with vivid moulds, tin cans cloaked with rust and cobwebs—failed to cross the threshold into the collection at all, held at bay by my aversion to their sullied state. Decisions about which things to save and which to discard seemed impossibly random, and the thought of trying to salvage it all sparked a blind panic. The materials undermined my resolve and seeded anxieties about the worth of my stubborn conservation effort.

The power of the archive to erase ‘contingencies of use’ and force an abstract equivalence between images or objects is never exhaustive, as Gillian Rose reminds us.\textsuperscript{24} The things I tried to place in the makeshift collection consistently disrupted and exceeded its logic—revealing the ‘fantasy’ of the total, disciplining collection (and, perhaps, the disciplining heritage site).\textsuperscript{25} The disjointed scraps would not let themselves be conscripted as evidence and their contingent meaning could not survive the system I tried to place them in. The things that remained outside the collection

in a state of unfinished disposal—degraded, superfluous—mocked my attempt to recuperate the remains into a comprehensive conservation scheme. Faced with these artefacts, I sensed shards of memory that seemed to have no place in the tidy narration of one farm’s micro-history. I had come up against what Tony Bennett describes as a mismatch between ‘the raw materials of... history and the rhetorics governing the forms in which national pasts [can] fittingly be represented’. 26

Consider a tattered newspaper item about a ‘monster’ women’s suffrage petition, for example, lying next to a stack of clipped recipes, a bit of stained letterhead advertising Emma’s poultry farm, and a holey sock. Or a romanticized image of a young Indian on a California orange crate label, the crate a makeshift shelf fastened to the claim shack which sealed the fate of the tribal migration route on the hillside above. Such alignments fractured the smooth progression of history into a series of contingent choices and political instabilities. Or maybe they didn’t. Maybe these were just accidental arrangements that meant nothing at all, or nothing much. The uncertainty about what to ‘make’ of these things was ever present. The waste status of the objects, though theoretically annulled by the reclamation of the site, persisted in dozens of minor encounters. The
residual materials seemed characterised by an 'irreducible scrappiness' (to borrow a useful term from Barbara Herrnstein Smith). The scrappiness inhered in their incompletion and redundancy, but it also stemmed from the way they seemed to generate interpretations that were at odds with each other—'scraping' about the content of the past they were being asked to speak to.

Digging

Although the homestead's artefacts did fit, if awkwardly, into a heritage template, they seemed to insist on the possibility of other kinds of knowledge, other memories about the texture and the particularity of the past in this place. Sometimes these memories carried a political charge; in other encounters they shaded into tactile, even sensual, registers of experience. The remaindered objects retained what Kirsten Emiko McAllister has described as, 'an illustrative power unto themselves' that could not be captured within the structure of remembrance I, and others, were establishing. This awareness became the seed of my research proposal, which I began to develop after I left Montana to take up graduate study in the UK. I wanted to continue to investigate the homestead's material culture, but I needed to come up with other ways of working with the scrappy things, an intuitive methodology that could apprehend uncertain effects at their point of emergence. Theoretically, I sought to defer the moment when the act of inventory or disposal spirited the object away, to hold onto some of 'the indeterminacy introduced by the gap or moment when value is yet to be decided'. I was after a research practice that would let me work with the homestead's materiality on its own terms, when the residue of cultural memory remained fluid and uncertain. As Meike Bal explains, the production of cultural memory is 'an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continually modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future'. Both individual and social ways of making sense of the past become folded into the generative

process of cultural remembrance; it was this process I wanted to examine in my work. 32

I wasn't sure of the resources I would need to undertake this task, though I had a fairly good idea of what I wanted to avoid. I'll let one Montana heritage site stand in to represent the approach I wanted to find a way around, if at all possible. The Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site, a restored nineteenth century complex managed by the National Park Service, lies about one hundred miles east of Missoula at the edge of the town of Deer Lodge. (I discuss this site in more detail in Chapter 5.) Approximately 27,000 objects and 73 linear feet of archival material make up the Grant-Kohrs collection, a combination of household and ranch artefacts and primary historical documents. The 'Scope of Collection Statement' for the ranch comments, 'The museum and archival collection are integral to the site's interpretive themes, which govern the public education programs and visitor services activities'. The site's primary interpretive theme is distilled in this statement:

Grant-Kohrs Ranch reflects the western range cattle industry from its frontier origins through recent times. The frontier cattle era is significant to the nation's westward expansion, and profoundly influenced American culture and environment in both reality and romance. 33

A visit to the site offers little evidence that might trouble this stated theme. Extensive period reconstructions—from the cattle king's elegant drawing room to the cowhands' bunkhouse—represent the past as an inevitable linear progression, a gradual expansion into a more or less empty territory (although a wolf skin robe and some beaded pouches gesture to the generosity of the displaced inhabitants). The ranch displays 'a retrospectively immanent structure in past events, creating an illusion that things happened as they did because they had to'. 34

The popular memory of the wild (and then domesticated) West presented at the Grant-Kohrs Ranch is deeply familiar to most Americans (even more so in an era when their President invokes the cowboy ideology of the Wild West to justify his moral crusades). This familiarity masks the ethical and political work performed by the site's display and conservation scheme. 35 Although the presentation of the artefacts is inextricably bound up with the affirmation of a lineage reliant on

34 Lowenthal, 234.
35 Bowker and Star, 320.
unequal relations of power and inheritance, the site's 'essentializing foreclosures' remain all but invisible. The ranch's arrangement of its material cultures establishes what Tony Bennett has called a 'conservative romanticism' about the nation's past. The cultural artefacts fall into line with the selective history on display, and though a visitor could certainly read the interpretation against the grain, this would take substantial effort.

At the Grant-Kohrs Ranch, the relatively seamless presentation of material history leaves little to the work of the visitor's imagination. Other sites, however, emphasize, rather than obscure, the seams and the sutures that hold interpretations together, and so call attention to the work of memory. In places like the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in Manhattan, and in various public history projects, people experiment with more artful and tentative approaches. One project, conducted not in North America, but in Germany, offers an example of this alternative practice. In the 1980s, a group of Berlin citizens (later organised as the Aktives Museum) staged a public action

---

37 Bennett, 120.
38 Mike Crang points out that although heritage sites rely on a reification of their object of interpretation, individual experiences of these sites perform the past in a multitude of different ways. I pick up on this point in the following section. Mike Crang, "On the Heritage Trail: Maps of and Journeys to Olde Englande," *Society and Space* 12 (1994).
on the site of the former Gestapo House Prison in the centre of Berlin, next to the wall that divided
the East and West. In an unsanctioned protest, the group excavated the rubble-strewn field where
the prison once stood. Their illegal excavations uncovered the foundations and cell walls of the
ruined prison cellars where people had been detained during the National Socialist era. Their goal
was not to interpret the landscape as a historical object, writes Karen Till, but to initiate a process
through which, ‘[s]ocial spaces, locations, and material objects are materially, discursively, and
symbolically unearthed, redefined, and newly mapped, only to be interpreted and critically analysed
again.... an ongoing process of landscape production’. The Aktives members refused to settle on
an authoritative history for the site, and instead insisted that remembering must be a process
engaged with on an individual register—with people creating their own exhibits and structuring
their own meaning out of the debris. The work of memory continued through a process akin to
that described by Walter Benjamin: ‘[R]emembrance must not proceed in the manner of a narrative
or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest epic and rhapsodic manner, assay its spade in
ever new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layers’.

Public historian Michael Frisch has called for work that involves people in ‘exploring what it
means to remember, and what to do with memories to make them alive and active as opposed to
mere objects of collection’. The Aktives work (though complicated by its own practical and
institutional constraints) seemed to answer this call to action, and I could sense, in the homestead’s
residual material culture, the possibility for a sympathetic practice. The intensities of the overlooked
objects seemed to call for interpretation that could, to return to Benjamin, ‘set to work an
engagement with history original to every new present’. I did not necessarily seek to recuperate a
marginalized history, but to sidestep the closures that can channel any history onto an unbroken

40 Karen E Till, *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,
forthcoming).
41 A permanent interpretive centre is now under construction at the site, and it remains unclear how the
dynamic interpretive strategy adopted by the group will make the transition to an institutional space. The
radicalism of the 1980s excavations has gradually given way more pragmatic concerns—namely, the legal
protection of the site and the solicitation of government support for its continued existence. In the process,
the original interpretive goals have been compromised somewhat. Nonetheless, the early work still stands as a
42 Walter Benjamin, ”A Berlin Chronicle,” in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1997 (1932)),
314.
43 Michael Frisch, in Hayden, 246.
44 Walter Benjamin, ”Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,” in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1997 (1937)), 351.
path on which certain stories become untellable. I wanted to craft a methodology that encouraged acts of critical remembering through encounters with fragmented remains. 'As soon as the possibility of waste is taken into account, write Brian Neville and Johanne Villeneuve, 'it seems that some sort of mediation becomes necessary'. The mediation I would attempt moved between disposal and salvage, seeking a method that would let me interpret these things without forcing their inscription in an official narrative that sealed off their indeterminate effects. The scrappiness of the homestead's objects would open up alternative possibilities for encountering the past in place, working through the residues of cultural memory.

**Memory work**

In order to explore the effects I was interested in, I needed to rethink the way I had been approaching the things. It wouldn't work to go to the artefacts and read them as evidence in a selective presentation of the homestead's history. Ultimately, I needed to move away from a broadly representational or semiotic understanding of the objects and their contribution to the work of memory. In research on the interaction between individuals and personal artefacts, memory is often discussed in terms that emphasise its storage or inscription. On an intimate register, the subjects of research are understood to use objects as memory prompts to materialise elements of identity and experience they wish to preserve. The meaning of these objects may change as the people and the objects age, or as the objects come into contact with different people, but the emphasis remains on the way that the object contains memory and its associated

---


precipitates. On a grander scale, public objects—memorials and monuments—may function as mnemonic anchors for national and local identities. The memory vested in these monumental forms may be popular or elite—and a single monument often negotiates the simultaneous inscription of several contesting assertions of public memory. What characterises this kind of research, however, is a tendency to identify memory as a structure of symbolic or political meanings that can be read out of the objects in question (or studied through the complex processes that place it in there).

Such relationships are obviously worth critical attention, but this 'receptacle' model of materiality and memory didn't seem that useful for the work I wanted to do. What happens to objects that have no one actively caring for them, no inscription of memory encoded in their form? Should we assume that memory doesn't materialise in encounters with these neglected objects, or that it materialises differently? The work I wanted to do seemed to require a more flexible way of understanding what was going on. In the early explorations, my perception of the homestead's artefacts seemed to be affected by many different factors—their location, my mood, the adjacent artefacts, and even the season of the year. The traces of memory seemed shifty and unpredictable, differently inflected in each encounter. The objects were not entirely passive in this relationship. Despite their air of abandonment, the things still retained traces of the social and material relations they had once belonged to. These latent (or expressed) relations generated certain effects. The objects seemed to 'act' through these effects, and to contribute to the formation of contingent attachments and understandings I was only partly aware of. I couldn't ask what the objects 'meant', because their meaning was always in formation. The meaning of these things was not given in their physical form for me to access, but was created—or performed—in the moment. In the words of Nicholas Thomas, 'objects are not what they were made to be, but what they become'. I needed to adopt a language that would allow me to describe the way the things participated in the


making and remaking of meaning, and of memory.\textsuperscript{51}

If memory is, very broadly, an apprehension of the past that involves some kind of recognition, the kind of memory I want to talk about in this thesis imagines that recognition performed through complex material engagements. Memory, in this sense, is produced out of spatial and material encounters, and is not a simple matching up of a cognitive trace with a recollecting subject.\textsuperscript{52} 'Memory cannot be confined to a purely mentalist or subjective sphere,' comments Nadia Seremetakis. 'It is a culturally mediated material practice that is activated by embodied acts and semantically dense objects'.\textsuperscript{53} People can make memory by doing things with things. Sometimes this is a tactile experience; sometimes it is imaginative or intellectual. (In the case of the homestead campaign, I made memory instrumentally, and mobilised it to make our claims audible to the powers that be.) But things can also make memory by doing things with people. Objects contribute their own resources and potentialities to an encounter. They can propose knowledges about their past that seem to have little concern for an act of solicitation on the part of a human subject. Objects may also generate effects that register as knowledge about the past even when the person encountering them has no prior familiarity with their existence. Specific materialities may foster the transmission of memory traces after the 'original' rememberer, the person with a direct experience of the material entity, has passed on.\textsuperscript{54} The capacity to 'remember' extends into the world (to the extent that objects afford opportunities for the apprehension of otherwise inaccessible pasts).\textsuperscript{55} In the interface between materiality and sociality, different agencies—discursive and practiced, textual and tactile—contribute to memory-making practices.


\textsuperscript{51} I'm grateful to Gillian Rose for bringing me around to where I could see how theories of performance might explain some of the effects I was interested in. The work of scholars who have studied performative and 'non-representational' aspects of experience as they are integrated with, rather than excluded from, representational and semiotic understandings has also been useful. Hayden Lorimer, "Telling Small Stories: Spaces of Knowledge and the Practice of Geography," \textit{Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers} 28 (2003); Catherine Nash, "Performativity in Practice: Some Recent Work in Cultural Geography," \textit{Progress in Human Geography} 24 (2000); George Revill, "Performing French Folk Music: Dance, Authenticity, and Nonrepresentational Theory," \textit{Cultural Geographies} 11 (2004).


Because a strong tradition in European thought places the memory faculty squarely within the bounded human subject, this assertion may seem counterintuitive. The conception of memory as a performative process works, however, from a more dispersed and mobile understanding of subjectivity. Selfhood is formed through entanglements with the material world. Materiality is not a passive field of reference that awaits inscription from an active mind, but is itself constitutive of human subjectivity. Things make persons—and provide the conditions of possibility for perception—as much as persons make things. Our identities and our experiences are tangled up in our relations with the things we surround ourselves with. Encounters with objects are also encounters with dynamic social (and ecological) worlds. Interactions with the remained objects of a former mode of existence can activate a process of remembrance that carries threads of past lives into our present (and plies those threads up with our own imagined versions of those lives). In the practice of memory, the past becomes ‘available to the present’ as a ‘resource through which… action can occur’—in a folding of temporalities, spatialities, and subjectivities.

My use of the term ‘memory’ in this thesis is tactical, and is not meant to present a comprehensive theory of memory’s effects. I apply it in a vocabulary that lets me articulate what happens when interactions between people and objects generate a felt (but often ephemeral) connection to past experience. Applied to the work I wanted to do at the homestead, this conception of memory-making offered a way out of the cul-de-sac presented by the reading of symbolic or historical significance out of the things. Working with an understanding of memory as a performative effect, I could begin to describe encounters that engaged with the ‘irreducible scrappiness’ of the homestead’s objects. It meant that I didn’t have to set the objects aside if they failed to conform to narrative we had constructed for the homestead. Some of the excess meaning and matter might be allowed to remain, and yet still offer interpretive resources. The research methodology would elicit different kinds of knowledges, variously inflected through sensory, experiential, intellectual, and political registers.

---

I had already experienced the way idiosyncratic and affective memory traces could be tangled up with social and political aspects of remembrance. Seremetakis calls attention to the way discarded objects call forth recollections of ‘sensory-emotive’ cultural experience, even in the absence of a direct lived link. For Benjamin, outmoded objects provoke memories of latent utopian desire, which overturn the complacencies of modern capitalist formations of ‘history as progress’. Both reveal a concern for the ethical implications of our encounters with overlooked materialities. The ethical stance expressed here is, as Kevin Hetherington observes, premised ‘on a notion of care for the absent, a making of self through the encounter with its presence, and a concern for its possible return’. By acknowledging the possibility of a ‘return’, I hoped to generate resources for informed and creative work in the present. Although I’m not sure I would have described it so at the time, I set out to explore how memory could be made and re-made through material encounters, unravelling the interpretive essentialisms that seemed to haunt many attempts to make sense of the past through its objects.

---

61 Seremetakis, 134. There is a broader feminist tradition at work here in this assertion of the value of personal, affective experience as a source of knowledge.
62 Ibid., 10.
Back in the saddle

When I began my research, I brought these insights into the field in a very provisional form, initially unsure of how to pursue the encounters I was after. In my eighteen-month absence, the homestead had settled into hybrid state somewhere between a heritage site and a quirky community farm. Historical precedents informed efforts to revitalise the property—sheep grazed in the fields, a garden grew at the bottom of the orchard where William and Emma once cultivated their cash crops. In practice, the renewed uses were adaptive and flexible, and developing on-site programs emphasized active visitor participation in maintenance and restoration projects. I entered this altered landscape with my ideas about creating an intermediate space where interpretation could poke into `ever-deeper layers'. For several months, this work was relatively formless. I returned to the old inventory task, helped out with work projects around the site, recovered a few more objects from the bottomless stores of the sheds and root cellars, and made myself available for tours and educational programs. By the end of my first season of fieldwork, I was beginning to see the research taking shape around a few overlapping themes. Each of these themes seemed linked to a different ‘tactic’ for apprehending the effects generated when people engaged with the homestead’s miscellaneous artefacts (I should admit here that often ‘people’ was ‘person’. From the beginning, there was an element of auto-ethnography to my research practice).

In this thesis, I describe these tactics as different kinds of ‘memory work’. I did things with things, and watched other people do things with things, and watched the things do things to the people. Memory was made in particular ways, with particular materials and technologies. The work was about finding different ways of ‘taking up the proposals’, in the words of Michael Shanks, offered by these scrappy things:

Understanding something I have found is to take up its proposals, the things evoked but not actually present in it, following its references. Exploring the variations which the object undergoes through the action of our imagination is to trace an emergent meaning in front of the object and sideways.

---

68 I don’t intend to draw a comparison between the ‘memory work’ I perform here and the therapeutic memory work performed in psychoanalytic practice, though there may be correspondences I am not aware of. Frigga Haug, “Memory Work: The Key to Women’s Anxiety,” in Memory and Methodology, ed. Susannah Radstone (Oxford: Berg, 2000).
I didn't presume to know what forms of memory might emerge from these encounters before I started. Each of the four chapters making up the core of the thesis is concerned with a different tactic; in each of these tactics, a particular form of knowledge seemed to emerge in more concentrated form. The crude shorthand terms for these different knowledges, these memory precipitates, might be archival, associative, haptic, and ecological, but these are only useful to flag to the discussion that takes place in the individual chapters. In the gaps between the substantive chapters, I present a few experiments with alternative strategies for evoking the effects generated by specific objects and materials. The content of the four main chapters touches on the following themes and questions.

In my earlier discussion of how archives and collections work to generate particular kinds of knowledge, I suggested that the power of these conservation techniques to structure meaning is never absolute. The possibility always remains for other experiences of these ordered and ordering spaces—a point made by several scholars who have considered the more seductive and disorienting aspects of research in archives and collections. When I returned to the inventory task at the beginning of my fieldwork, I was reminded of the diminishment that seemed to occur when objects entered the archive, and the recalcitrance of some things when faced with systems of value that denied their scrappy, indeterminate presence. But I also became aware of how inventory practices might contain within them the potential for more creative approaches to material memory. The routine process sparked a meditation that allowed other, less structured, approaches to form. In Chapter 2, I describe how I mimicked conventional practice to discover the point of friction embedded in it. Inspired by models from contemporary art practice, I began to play within the collection, adapting the process of inventory to draw out traces of affective and intimate experience.

While I gathered objects together in the homestead's collection, I began to sense how the accidental alignment of objects and traces could lead to unexpected insights. The clustering of things often initiated a chain of associations that seemed to shed light on idiosyncratic aspects of the homestead's past and render legible otherwise overlooked materials. I began to write short

---

70 Harriet Bradley, "The Seductions of the Archive: Voices Lost and Found," History of the Human Sciences 12, no. 2 (1999); Andrea Fisher, Let Us Now Praise Famous Women (London: Pandora, 1987); Alice Yaeger Kaplan,
pieces that tried to capture some of these fragile alignments. As I assembled the things in textual form, I became aware of the way the recollections of people who had lived at the homestead during their youth seemed to resonate with the material memories I had collected. Chapter 3 traces these associative pathways, both through the thickets of individual recollection and in movement among the homestead’s residual material cultures.

Another tactic for apprehending memory arose out of practical, embodied experience. In everyday life, the material world gives back ‘refractions of our own sensory biographies’; objects trigger memories of habituated bodily knowledge and unique sensory events.71 In work projects at the homestead, participants revived such sensory memories through the use of tools and the application of previously learned skills. As I watched this work happening, and participated myself, I became aware of an additional effect. As people engaged in processes of salvage and reconstruction, they seemed to spark a kind of haptic echo of older practices, a felt trace activated through the performance of former skills and techniques. Acts of empathetic reuse resulted in the production (and recycling) of a form of embodied, mimetic memory, a process I consider in Chapter 4.

All of the tactics I developed accepted the inevitable transformation of the objects under consideration, but only one focused on the possibility of complete dissolution. As I worked to place artefacts in the inventory, I often came into contact with materials in advanced states of decay and disintegration. Rather than write these objects off, I decided to track the way their degradation seemed to result in a doubled, and often disorienting, sensation of potential meaning. Such material shed simultaneous (but often indecipherable) traces of cultural and biological memory, as if the materials had to fall into decay at one level in order to come into their own on another. Chapter 5 tracks memory through materials altered by rodents and moulds, bugs and bacteria, to sketch an outline for an ‘ecology of memory’ that shifts back and forth between cultural and other-than-

"Working in the Archives," Yale French Studies 77 (1990); Rose; Carolyn Steedman, Dust (Manchester.
cultural registers.

My methods for realising these tactical intentions were haphazard. Over two fieldwork seasons (April-October of 2002 and 2003), I acted as curator, archaeologist, carpenter, advocate, shepherd, archivist, and educator—with one summer in residence as the site's primary caretaker. Sometimes, my work involved straightforward participant observation with the homestead's various visitors and volunteers. Often, however, my ethnographic practice enlisted the material objects as my social subjects. In other moments, I found myself turning my research lens back on my own behaviour. These improvisations with the homestead's materiality don't add up to a cumulative whole, and not all of the approaches I describe here are compatible. Each of the improvised tactics, however, engages in some way with the process of salvage, a recovery of unwanted material. And all of them work from an epistemological stance that seeks meaning through doing. My research practice did not encounter the field as a space apart to be studied, but animated it as it moved through it. Memory-making emerged as a reciprocal process, co-fabricated through interactions between people and things and bound up with subjectivity in complicated ways.

On either side of the fence

I'm aware that the discussion above skirts around one issue that has practical and theoretical implications for the work I set out to do. The issue can be boiled down to the question of intentionality. Sometimes, I write as if my research took place at the whim of the fickle objects, with insight arising through accidental engagements and unsolicited offerings; in other moments, the discussion betrays an assumption that I was ultimately capable of shaping and controlling the process I had set in motion. This issue bleeds into questions about voluntary and involuntary remembering that merit some consideration here before I move on.

The question of intention is a tricky one to address because it assumes, on some level, a cultural register.
sovereign subject capable of independent action.\textsuperscript{74} The dispersed understanding of subjectivity I’ve outlined above would seem to mediate against such intentional engagements. That said, there \textit{were} moments when I, and others, asked the homestead’s objects to perform in particular ways and, in doing so, forced a deliberate frame around their powers of evocation and expression. For me, these occasions seemed to arise when I came to the objects looking for evidence that would affirm my nostalgic notions about Depression-era rural life. For others, on the lookout for frontier past, this involved a search for iconic artefacts of American expansion and settlement.\textsuperscript{75} One visitor hitched the homestead’s `doubletree’ (the crossbar used to harness horses to a wagon or implement) to an imaginary covered wagon (though Ray Moon travelled by train). Dydia DeLysier notes a similar effect in a California ghost town, where artefacts participate in visitors’ reconstructions of a mythic Wild West, inflected through popular culture and half-forgotten history lessons.\textsuperscript{76} These encounters align with what Benjamin described (usually in negative terms) as a kind of voluntary memory, a willed connection to the past (which may nonetheless draw its power from discursive and ideological formulations of history).

\textsuperscript{74} Anderson.

\textsuperscript{75} A discussion of such iconic American artefacts is given in Edward L Hawes, "Artifacts, Myth, and Identity in American History Museums," \textit{Museology and Identity: Basic Papers ICOM Study Series} 10 (1986). The homestead, ultimately, offered relatively few iconic artefacts to hang such interpretations on (though if more charismatic artefacts were in evidence the story might have begun quite differently, and this thesis probably wouldn’t have been written at all). The things belonged, instead, to what Carlos Schwantes calls the ‘missing century’ in the American West, one in which the material and public culture of the region became increasingly indistinguishable from the rest of the country—or, as was often the case, distinguished itself through decades of fraught labour politics and difficult race relations that remain outside the scope of mainstream remembrance. Carlos A Schwantes, "The Case of the Missing Century, or Where Did the American West Go after 1900?", \textit{Pacific Historical Review} 70, no. 1 (2001).

At the other end of the spectrum, confrontations with the homestead’s residual material could generate unsolicited and unexpected effects, confrontations with absence that resisted any intentional comprehension. Monica Degan and Hetherington write, ‘The absent is not simply the “not there” but a particular kind of blankness that attains a figural presence’.\(^7\) I experienced these figural presences as inarticulate sensations and, sometimes, a consciousness of what can only be described as the homestead’s ghosts.\(^8\) I came upon unsettling presences in a drawer of junk (the ghost of Emma’s disability held in the collection of crutch-tip grips, all worn through to nothing), on the phantom ‘Trail to the Buffalo’, in caches of empty whiskey bottles.\(^9\) My excavations of the homestead’s cellars and attics involved a systematic invasion of privacy; certain encounters disturbed presences long dormant in the abandoned matter. In excavations of the recent past, the formalised methods intended to insert a critical and protective distance between the archaeologist and the traces of the dead often fail to perform their function.\(^8\) Distress and nausea become elements of the research process, as investigation stirs up sensations of absent presence (and creates new ghosts through the irreparable disturbance of material residues).\(^8\)

The memory performed through these encounters appeared erratically and involuntarily, as fragments, scents, and objects triggered unpredictable responses. Sometimes the ghostly traces seemed to seek reparation for unpaid debts and lingering injustices—the displacement of the native Montanans from their ancestral lands, the gradual impoverishment of subsistence farmers in the face of agricultural consolidation. I also experienced involuntary memory as sensory recollections of my own previously forgotten experience (the sense in which Marcel Proust used the term), or as sudden apprehensions of occluded social meaning (in accordance with Benjamin’s development of Proust’s initial concept).\(^8\) These experiences hinged on moments of disclosure. ‘It does not involve a bold statement of fact,’ Hetherington writes, ‘but an unfolding of understanding through an

---

\(^8\) Degan and Hetherington: 3.
unexpected gap—an absence made present'. I have to admit that I find these encounters with the absent present incredibly difficult to express in the writing I do. They always skate on the edge of the un-representable, skirting around sedimented stories that will not give themselves up even to my circuitous methods.

The encounters I spend most of my time exploring in this thesis are located somewhere in the grey area between involuntary and voluntary modes of remembrance. I needed to create some kind of structure for my collaborations with the people and things at the homestead, but this structure remained porous and malleable. I often found, as Ann Game suggests in her work on heritage, a double movement in play: unpredictable effects broke into structured acts of remembrance; the imposition of an ordering frame for the work created conditions that allowed for the disturbance of this order, and the evocation of other memories, other trajectories. A paradoxical creativity emerged out of this work, premised on asserting some form of intention and then watching its destruction or deferral in contact with the things. The understanding we generated moved past the acquisition of empirical knowledge to spark small moments of transformation.

---

84 Mike Crang, "The Presence of the Past: Texts, Tactility, and Memory (Conference Abstract)," in *AAG Annual Meeting* (Los Angeles: 2002). Crang's paper notes that most geographical work on heritage (concerned either with unmasking dominant representations of the past or examining the contested negotiation of possible pasts) tends not to deal with issues of absence and unrepresentability.
Placed theory

My excavations and improvisations, though motivated in part by ethical commitments, also drew inspiration from another source, which can only be described as the homestead itself. Working in a place where the inhabitants never threw anything away, I found myself enacting a similar refusal, holding on to the tiniest scraps. The evidence of exuberant accretions, provisional solutions, and functional collage in the homestead’s structures and artefacts encouraged me to attempt similar strategies in my research with ideas and objects. Examples of creative re-use inspired me to look more closely at the things I had to work with, and to fold them into new forms—both conceptual and physical. In the end, the critical awareness I gained through sensitivity to the Randophs creative salvage ethic led me to introduce parallel acts of renovation and reuse into my research methods. 86

My emulation of the Randolph’s salvage practices also worked through my research on a more intimate register. The Randolphins used material objects to remind themselves who they were

---

and wanted to be, to bolster their identities with tangible confirmations. They gleaned these objects from the environment they found themselves in—a locust sprig from trees in the gully, a magazine photograph, William’s note on the back of an unpaid bill. As my research developed, I found myself responding in a curious way to this evidence of the construction of scrappy subjectivities. I began to pay attention to how I was constructing my idea of self, and self as researcher, through my work at the homestead. I had opened up a messy and ambiguous space, where my own identity seemed tangled with the people and the pasts I sought to study.

The awareness of my own porous subjectivity also arose in confrontations with the degradation and decay of the homestead’s remnants. The wasted, marginal quality of the things had a habit of reminding me that I was not necessarily directing the progress of my research. This is, I think, partly what was going on when I panicked about the mouldy papers and the rodent riddled drawers. I had to recognise that I hadn’t mastered the things after all, that there were other forces at work that cared little about my intentions. My response—visceral aversion, or even fear—brought me back into a material relation with the things and unsettled my academic aims. Waste, as Gay Hawkins observes, makes visible the complicated borders of human subjectivity by showing how we are implicated in the material world. ‘Our feelings about waste can signal the plurivocality of being, the ways in which we are inextricably connected to that which we so often want to eliminate and escape’.

In order to make sense of the knowledge was gathering, I needed to make common cause, ‘to go,’ as Avery Gordon would have it, ‘beyond the fundamental alienation of turning social relations into just the things we know and toward reckoning with how we are in these stories, with how they change us, with our own ghosts’. Carolyn Steedman would claim that some such entangling is an inevitable outcome of any attempt to connect with or reconstruct the past. Our own ‘modes of desire and representation’, Steedman writes, work with the ‘irreducible traces of an actual history’, but we use these traces to tell a story that is as much about ourselves as it is about

---

90 Gordon, 22.
the people we claim to understand.91 In this sense, my presentation of my research outcomes is not so easily separated from my experience of doing that research and making sense of it as I went along.

The explanation of my methodology is woven throughout every passage in this thesis, not set aside in a separate chapter. Method and material produced each other in parallel, and it would be impossible to communicate one without the other. My presence remains in the text, and the writing voice I have chosen allows personal reflections to coexist alongside academic arguments.92 The writing follows the ‘twists and turns, forgettings and rememberings… that a normal social scientific account routinely attempts to minimize’.93 Many of the descriptive passages in the thesis are lifted directly from the field notebooks I kept. Although I did conduct a few recorded interviews, the notebooks were my central tool for recording progress, asking questions, and reflecting on my experiences. Frustration and confusion often attended my attempts to make sense of the homestead’s objects, and the decision not to edit these moments out is bound up with my sense that some of my most valuable insights emerged out of such initial uncertainty.

Victor Buchli recently commented that most material culture research goes to great lengths ‘to keep the transfixing, enchanting and promiscuous affects of the artefact at bay’.94 Through the use of the textual strategies described above, I’ve tried to acknowledge these affects and describe the way they mediated my experience of the objects. But the text has difficulty expressing the character of these ragged things, their textures and forms. The images in this thesis form a supplementary storyline. A discussion of the work the images do is included in a postscript.

93 Gordon, 27.
say much about them here, except to suggest that they can be read as a record of an aesthetic and corporeal production of knowledge that occurred alongside my other endeavours.95

Mapping absence

The stories I tell in this thesis take up the discarded material culture of a certain place in order to test out an expanded sense of how history and memory might be made, and re-made, through encounters with objects and images. The methods I propose here begin to imagine how, as Hayden Lorimer and Fraser MacDonald have asked, ‘[g]eography’s earlier interest in objects and artefacts can itself be critically restored, not only informing our functional relationship with “things” but rescuing new realms of meaning from the fragmentary and the ephemeral’.96 The rescue I attempt is quite a distance from the salvage archaeology of my first encounter. The work of salvage does not attempt to recover a threatened past in order to ensure its preservation; it engages, instead, in a conversation that brings that past into the present in an active and creative form. Because I focus my interest on the slim temporal window when a wasted thing teeters on the edge of a transformation into something other—either by attention or by appropriation—the work itself is a chronicle of salvaged pieces, remainders from moments of temporary significance.

Early on in my excavations, I pulled a torn map from the root cellar. The tattered document depicts the northern edge of the town of Missoula, as it appeared in 1909. A grid of residential streets fills the southern part of the map, cut at a diagonal with the railroad right-of-way. To the east, more residential development shares a narrow swath of land with Missoula County Poor Farm and several substantial holdings. The dense urban patchwork of streets stops abruptly at a hatched contour that represents the steep rise of the foothills. Beyond this line, the map shows blank white space faintly marked with section boundaries.

But this foothill absence has been supplemented by a later addition. Rough pencil extends the section lines over the map border into the margin. Someone has written the name ‘Randolph’ across this expanded territory in adjacent quarter sections of land. Neighbours Sunseson and Peterson appear on their own quarter sections to the north and east. In a sense, the aim of this

96 Ibid.
thesis is not all that different from the aim of the edited map. Both work to assert the materiality of the overlooked and the omitted, and to tell stories from places on the edge, rather than the centre.\footnote{Brian Graham and Catherine Nash, eds., \textit{Modern Historical Geographies} (Harlow: Longman, 2000); Kathleen Stewart, \textit{A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an Other America} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).}
In June 1935, someone spread the sports section from the *Daily Missoulian* on the bottom of a kitchen drawer (16 1/3" long, 16" wide, 5" deep) in the Randolph farmhouse. Over the next decade, this drawer and its unlined mate filled with domestic detritus, the ordinary excess of household and farm. When I opened these drawers for the first time, I gleaned a few things for safekeeping—some antique flashlights, a brass button, a pencil sharpener. The things that remained were unremarkable, multiple, hardly worthy of salvage. When I opened the drawers again in 2002, the contents confronted me with a snarl of matter wound through with lengths of string and twine, stained with age and rodent waste, degraded almost to the point of illegibility.

I began to sort and sift. Gradually the objects gave up their fragile identities. Certain things resolved themselves in rough categories: doorknobs; buttons; gaskets and washers; buckles; corks; broken shoelaces; bits of chalk and wax; scraps of brown paper; rubber bits; bullet shell casings; tacks and nails; shoe heels; screws and hooks; keys. Other things insisted on their singularity: a cheap tin thimble printed with the names ‘Coolidge and Dawes’; a torn corner of a map showing the way to Box Elder Creek and the Blue Mud Hills; a red wallet notebook, apparently used by R. E. Randolph in the 1920s for notes and calculations (and for practicing his lower-case script on the alphabet); a turned wooden spindle, marked with faint pencil, ‘Grandma’s old chair’; two clothespin dolls with smudged inky smiles. I begin to see patterns, codes of collection and conservation. One drawer seemed turned inward to household rhythms of mending and making. The other seemed to reach out into the fields and fences and machines that made up the farm. When I finished, a layer of unsortable matter lay in the bottom of the drawers: petrified rubber shards, mouse turds, tiny scraps of printed paper, insect wings, lint, seeds, fibres, dust.
Surrounded by the evidence of my sifting and sorting, I found myself wanting to sneak back to the moment when I first pulled the drawers open, my eye caught by the flash of brass in a rat’s nest of cotton thread. Instead, I made a list. Each item in the drawer’s chaotic hold entered an inventory (except for the ones that got lost, or taken, or remained obstinately nameless). Eventually, I decided to arrange this list by the drawer’s own immanent order—the alphabet contained in Robert’s red notebook. (‘[T]he only order’, claims Georges Perec, ‘whose pertinence requires no justification’.) The list reads as a catalogue of mundane artefacts, but also a record of forgotten skills and knowledge.

Does anyone remember how to braid a lariat around the brass looped ‘honda’? How do you insert a bushing, darn a sock, or redeem a tax token? Can anyone tell me the way to the Blue Mud Hills?

Aluminium, crushed foil wad approximately 2” long.

Barrette, metal section, broken.

Battery seal, in flexible metal. Stamped, ‘Kathanode, New and Unused If This Seal On Post Is Not Broken, Pat. No. 1.97’.

Belt, leather, 42” long.

Bib, hose, with flat handle.

Bottle, glass with cork stopper, 2 ¼” high. Remnants of red label and fine white powder contents.

Bottle opener, steel. 3” long. ‘Missoula Brewing Co. Missoula, Mont.’ stamped on handle. Other side of handle stamped with symbols for suits of cards.

Bottle stopper, ceramic, white and black, in shape of six-sided die. Round base with ‘Japan’ stamped onto side and printed on bottom.

Bottle stoppers (5), constructed of rubber cylinder, a shaft with 'Hires Root Beer' printed on its flange, and a bolt with wing nut for adjustment of the stopper tightness.

Box, cardboard, Van Dyck brand cigars, contains a variety of fasteners.

Buckles (24), assorted, ⅛" - 2 ½".

Bulb, rubber, collapsed.

Button hook, 'Thistlewaite's Shoes, Helena, Mont.'

Buttons (5), 1 brass, star in centre with circling text, 'Missoula St. Ry. Co.'; 3 mother of pearl; 1 covered in short black fake fur.

Cap, threaded, with screen top.

Citrus wrappers (2) of pale yellow tissue paper, printed in green ink with recipes (Lemon Sherbet, Lemon Clear Sauce for Pudding), the brand name (Sunkist), an advertisement for 'The Sunkist Juicit', and a declaration of origin (Product of United States of America).

Chains (2), galvanized steel with end hooks.

Chalk stubs (4).

Clip, metal.

Clothespin dolls (2), wood and paper. One doll has a face drawn on in blue ink. The other is more elaborate, with brown paper wrapped around the head of the pin, on which is drawn a face with distinct eyebrows and pursed lips. A scarf of black tissue paper covers the head of the second doll.

Containers (2), enamelled metal, black lettering on white, 1 5/8" diameter. 'Mentholatum, Free sample, contents 1/10 oz.' 'A soothing external application to relieve the discomforts of head colds, nasal irritation, headache, sunburn.'

Corks (2).

Cork strips (2), ¼" by ¼" square, 7" and 4 ½" long. Slightly bent.

Corkscrews (2), one very small.

Corset stays (11), metal strips with tab and clip end, 14"-4 ½".

Cuff link, ⅜" square, tarnished brass; green plastic inset with image of horseshoe stamped onto face.

Darning knob, wooden.

Door knobs (4), 2 polished steel, 2 cut glass.

Drawer pulls (2).

Faucet handles (2), tarnished steel.

Fittings and fixtures (5), unknown function.

Flange, stainless steel, threaded.
Flashlights (3), cylindrical battery shafts and solid glass heads (Ray-o-Lite 1913 patent; Eveready 1915 patent; no patent visible).

Glass, beach, blue.

Glass cutter, metal with wooden handle, ‘Made in Germany’.

Hacksaw blade, broken at 4 ¾”.

Hammer, metal, function unknown.

Hinge, metal, 1 ¼”.

Hinge plate, metal, painted white, leaf design.

Holder, leather, black, with belt loop.

Hondas (2), brass and steel, form eye of lariat.

Hooks (8), steel, designed for wall, door, and ceiling mounting.

Heel cushions and shoe inserts (5), one pair Dr. Scholl’s brand (‘Springy and Easy, Pat. Apld. For’); three miscellaneous.

Keys (8), assorted shapes and sizes.

Knife, butter, tarnished.

Knife, pocket, brass and steel, with worn blade, awl, flat screwdriver point.

Knot, wood.

Label, for unknown product. Torn through an image of a man driving a horse team, hitched to a covered wagon.

Label, paper, ‘Compressed tablets for making lime water, Use 12 tablets for one pint of water. Shake bottle occasionally until tablets have integrated, set aside until the excess of lime has settled, then pour off and use the clear liquid only, keeping it in a well-stoppered bottle. Manufactured by John Wyeth and Brother, Inc. Philadelphia’.

Label, for ‘Westerner’s Men’s Outfitters, Home of Hart-Schaffner, and Marx-Clothing-Stetson Hats’.

Lamp fixture, brass with several components: a raised central portion with opening for 1” wick, with ‘No. 2 Queen Anne, 22’ written around the base; a flat turning knob and rod, with ‘Scoville Mfg. Made in US’ written on knob; and a base, threaded, which is attached to the main section and to four supports, which hold the lamp chimney. Dented and tarnished.

Lamp wicks (11), varying in length from 8 ¾” to 2 ½”, and in width from 1 ½” to ½”. Fabric is a thick weave of cotton thread. Two wicks have metal tabs on one end. Dingy, flecked with bits of paper and fibre.

Latch, spring loaded.

Lead, lump.

Lock plates, door fitting (2), with two screws.
Map corner, red and blue ink on white. Visible features: Box Elder Creek and the Blue Mud Hills, Sykes, Powderville, Boyes, Capitol.

Marble, clay ceramic, brown.

Mass, snarled and knotted thread, wire, buckles, string.

Measuring rule, wooden, folding, broken into 3 pieces.

Measuring tape, metal, with leather thong and nail attached at one end. 'The Lufkin Rule Co. Saginaw, Mich.'

Nail file, steel.

Nail pull, steel.

Needle, wooden, 6” long.

Newspaper section, one side is the classified section, property rental and help wanted ('General, all around...apply'); other side appears to be part of the sports section ('...full game...five hits').

Notebook, red oilcloth and paper. 2 3/4” by 5”. Written and stamped inside front cover, ‘R E Randolph, Box 832, Missoula, Mont.’ Lined pages are partly filled with calculations, expense records (one for Nov. 1920 lists payments for tires and car hire), costings (‘shell sockets, 37 cents each’), hay stack measurements, the alphabet (handwritten, lower case script).

Notebook, promotional, for the Spokane Chronicle, black leather, red paper, and white pages, 4” by 2 1/2”. Advertising slogans on the top of each page (ex. ‘Describe it in full your Want Ad will Pull’, and ‘More Chronicles Sold Daily in Spokane than there are occupied houses’). Pages torn out, none remaining with notes.

Padlock, ‘Corban’ brand.

Packing slip, 1” by 4”. ‘Packer No. 90. Please return this ticket if any defect or shortage is discovered in this package’.

Paintbrush, bristles worn away.

Paper scrap, catalogue, unable to discern the products being sold, though the base of what appears to be a fruit dish is visible over the words ‘One-third actu..’.

Paper seal, torn, from cigar box

Paper (40), torn pieces, brown, various lengths and widths. Some appear to be gummed on one side.

Paper scrap, blue lined, roughly 3 1/2” by 1”, with a faint pencil scribble (not legible text) on two lines. Folded, smudged with dirt.

Paper scrap, appears to be an advertisement (or instructions) for a hot water heater. Black ink with an orange border.

Paper scrap, side one: “ing and/ly consci/self of s/is no go/not so/and a/makes/natel’. Side two: ‘uilds a/ly thing/a cloud/orse in/a reg/aking/le a/he ish’.

Paper scrap, white, torn and crumpled, drawings of compass and protractor visible.

Paper scrap, 2 3/4” by 3 1/2”. One side completely covered with black crayon layer.
Paper strip, 3” by 9”, brown, Letters ‘BON” visible in black crayon, rest of word torn away.

Pencil stubs (4), 2 ‘carpenter’ style flat pencils, 1 hexagonal standard pencil, 1 round black. Lengths range from 3 ¼” to 4 ½”.

Pencil sharpener, brass.

Pins (11), bobby, clothes, cotter, safety, straight.

Pipe caps (2), threaded to 1 ¼”.

Plate, brass, circular, perforated with round holes, attached hook, function unknown.

Pliers (5), steel, one missing an arm, one marked with ‘Ford’ logo.

Pulley, 1” diameter.


Ratchet head, square fitting.

Residue, rodent droppings, rubber and paper fragments, lint, fibres, insect parts, plant stems, seeds, leaves, minute wire and leather scraps.

Ribbon, black gross-grain with attached flat bow, 2” wide, 23 ½” long.

Ring, 2 ½” diameter, yellow plastic.

Ring, brass.

Rubber bushings (7), two marked ‘U.S. Rubber, 5/8’ and ‘Wolverine, 9/16’, other assorted.

Rubber fittings (8), cylinders in red and black rubber, used for friction and protection on the ends of crutches or canes. All are worn through partly or completely, one is patched.

Rubber scraps and patches, assorted. Black and red rubber, with circles and semi-circles cut out. One piece of red is patched three times, the final patch overlapping the first.

Ruler, wood, 7”.

Sandpaper on canvas backing (2), 1 ½” wide, varying lengths. One rolled and one folded section.

Screw, eye (2), one with hexagonal washer attached.

Screwdriver, flat head, broken handle.

Seal (2), brown paper, for ‘Sheetrock, for Better Wallboard Construction-Patent Nos … (lists several)’. Accordion folded.

Sharpener, stone.

Shell casings (30), shotgun, various sizes.

Shoe heel, broken and worn.

Shoe horns (2), one metal and one Bakelite.
Shoelaces, assorted, cotton. Many broken or knotted in repair.

Spikes (2), metal, with round eye, one threaded on opposite end.

Spindle for wooden chair-back, 11 1/2" long, chipped green paint, 'Grandma's Old Chair' visible in faint pencil script.

Spools (18 1/4), wooden, vary in height from 1 1/4" to 2". Some display manufacturer on paper end labels: KT Co. Fall River Mass; Barbour's, Lisburn, Ireland.

Stones (9), assorted includes quartz, shale.

Straps (2), leather, coiled.

String balls (35), varying in diameter from 1/2" to 2 1/4". White (and some red) cotton thread and string, tightly wound. 2-ply to 4-ply. Some may have been pulled from the seams of flour and sugar sacks. Also a pile of loosely wound or once-wound balls of similar thread.

Tab, metal, 'Maytag'.

Tag, metal, round, stamped with star pattern.

Tape, electrical, black, roll.

Teaspoon, tarnished.

Thimble, galvanized steel or tin, decorated with a pitted pattern, and a blue band with raised silver upper-case letters, 'Coolidge and Dawes'. (1924 Presidential Election).

Token, in light tin or steel. Perforated in centre. Text on side one, 'Tax Token, Tax Commission, State of Washington. Side two, 'Tax on purchase, 10 cents or less, Ch. 180, Laws 1935'.

Tool, unknown use. Metal strips attached at centre pivot.

Tooth, human, juvenile incisor.

Tube, cardboard, 1 1/4" long.

Twist ties, red and tan paper over wire. 'Sunrise Produce Co. San Francisco, California, Klick Brand'.

Washers, wood (2), 'Flexo, W.W. Co'. on one.

Wax, green, small glob.

Wire, fine gauge, coiled.

Wrenches (2), double-headed, one with angled head, one marked “Maxwell 2".
My problem with classifications is that they don't last... The sheer number of things needing to be arranged and the near-impossibility of distributing them according to any truly satisfactory criteria mean that I never finally manage it, that the arrangements I end up with are temporary and vague, and hardly any more effective than the original anarchy.

Georges Perec
Species of Spaces and Other Pieces (1999)

CHAPTER TWO
Inventory and intervention

When applied to a gathering of marginal objects, the act of inventory, I argued in the previous chapter, can obscure contingent meanings and fragile associations. The ordering process closes down the proliferation of material memories and places the objects in service to an explanatory narrative structure. In this chapter, I return to the inventory to complicate these claims a bit. The chapter opens with an account of the homestead's collection in formation. After flagging a series of issues that arose in the inventory and collection process, I reflect on how I found the critical resources to address these issues not in guides to collection and cataloguing, but in the realm of contemporary art practice. Eventually, I was able to open up a space within the inventory process where I could locate traces of elusive memory I thought I had eliminated. Although it is true that the inventory could rob the homestead's artefacts of their capacity to provoke unpredictable effects, it also played an important role in the development of my alternative methodologies. The inventory process drew me into the disordered world created by the objects—even as it destroyed that world with its good intentions. The process of finding, sorting, naming and storing allowed me to work intimately with the homestead's things.

Beginning again

I arrived to begin my fieldwork in early April, after the snow had melted but before the green returned to the trees and the fields. The room I had chosen to work out of—Bill Jr.'s former bedroom—felt like an inauspicious choice in the grey light. Greasy coal dust coated the cinder

block walls and ceiling. A brass bedstead with a lone pair of boots next to it occupied half of the small space. A pair of overalls and a calfskin jacket hung limply in the closet. After I moved out the bed and Bill’s lingering belongings, I scrubbed down the walls and coated the grime with a ‘stain seal’. As I worked, thin spring snow flurried outside. I felt jumpy and uneasy in the cold house. The ‘knock, knock, knock’ of a woodpecker on the house’s patchy siding had me looking for a visitor at the door; the hat I’d left on a tall post turned itself into a lanky man outside the window, watching. The room’s ghosts dispersed with a fresh coat of green paint on the cinder blocks, though something drew me to leave two blocks bare where the coal dust had left a shadow, a pale arc tracing out the curve of the absent bedstead.

I built a workbench along one wall, dragged a set of shelves in from the kitchen (where they’d been holding Bill’s collection of greasy chainsaw parts, saw blades, and coffee cans), and moved in a table to use as a desk. Next, I assembled my tools: notebooks, marking pens, spray disinfectant, masking tape, folding cardboard archive boxes. I set up a spreadsheet on my computer with entries for item description, provenance, condition, storage site, and catalogue date. When these preparations were complete, I began to haul things into the room from their various locations. I began with the objects in the makeshift storage system I had instituted as the homestead’s volunteer curator. File cartons stored on a high shelf in a neighbourhood office contained documents loosely organised by topic (‘Mining’, ‘Farm How-To’, ‘Household’). The rooms of Bill Randolph, Jr.’s house contained stacks of cardboard boxes filled with miscellaneous objects (most of the boxes labelled with the site from which the objects had been salvaged). The bulk of the material, however, remained in the homestead’s other structures, scattered about on floors and shelves.
I began a process of listing and accounting that would continue throughout two seasons of fieldwork. My motives for taking on this task were mixed. Though my access to the City’s property was conditioned on my willingness to take on the role of curator, I had the freedom to interpret this role broadly. The City’s historic preservation officer asked for ‘an inventory’ of the site’s artefacts, but I was given very little direction on what this might look like, and which artefacts were to be included (a simple list of a few dozen objects of obvious historical or educational value probably would have sufficed). In the end, my decision to pick up the inventory task boiled down to my own uncertainty about how to begin. The inventory process became my disciplining task, and the point of departure for my other explorations.

I learned to watch my own performance that spring. Hour after hour, I sat in a wooden chair at the wobbly desk. I created a rudimentary classification system for the archival documents (which included original correspondence, notes, forms, receipts, and ledgers), based on the earlier system of themed files. Mass-produced print materials (books, magazines, and promotional flyers) had their own boxes and a separate inventory spreadsheet. The artefacts remained, for the most part, boxed with things from the general location where they had been found, reflecting their initial disorderliness even in their sorted, stored condition. (For example, the first box in the collection, ‘Moon Cabin #1’, contained a magazine clipping, a mailing tag, a pair of badger paws, a fragment of metal screen, a pinstripe vest, a canvas apron, a leather mitten, a shelf bracket, a glass bottle, and a splitting wedge.) If an association with a particular location had been lost, I entered the artefacts in ‘miscellaneous’ boxes. This rough sorting method presented problems, and often things that should have been in the print or archive boxes remained in the artefact boxes because I felt the association with related artefacts was more important than the consistency of the categories I’d set, or because they seemed to straddle the
boundaries between 'artefact' and 'document'.² Mine was an inexact science.

As I worked through the boxes of things, I felt a constant, nagging sense of inadequacy. On bad days, I felt like the inconsistencies in my inventory cancelled out any utility it might have. The irreducible scrappiness of the things continued to have effects. Always in the back of my mind I could hear the voice of University of Montana archivist Dale Johnson telling me to throw everything away, to get out the shovel and start filling rubbish sacks. I was working with a collection dogged by 'randomness and risk'.³ I grew easily irritated with the monotony of the task, the restricted movement, the dust. I even developed an undeniable annoyance with the people who had accumulated the things I now needed to deal with—their penchant for note-taking, their unwillingness to discard anything, the traces their bodies had left in contact with the materials. Carolyn Steedman captures some of the peculiar panic that arises out of this kind of archival overload: 'You think: I could get to hate these people; and then: I can never do these people justice; and finally; I shall never get it done'.⁴

The reference tools I'd collected weren't much help in calming my anxiety. A key to the identification of bottles and cans offered some initial guidance, but once you've identified one Hill's Brothers coffee can, you've identified them all. I had higher hopes for the Nomenclature for Museum Cataloguing, the cataloguing handbook used in most North American museum collections. The Nomenclature provides standardised terms for every 'man-made' object imaginable, organised into hierarchical categories by original intended function. I quickly found, however, that there was something perverse about applying this system in a place where the majority of the objects either had either shed their 'original function' or fell under 'Category 10: Unclassifiable Artifacts: Artifact Remnant'. The Nomenclature itself admits defeat when faced with idiosyncrasy: 'The system, like any generic system, necessarily overlooks the texture of the world reflected by objects and the language we use to describe them'.⁵ Its promise of comprehensive sorting, instead of steeling me to the task at hand, made me more depressed about the inventory task I'd chosen to take on.

---

⁴ Carolyn Steedman, Dust (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 18.
⁵ James R Blackaby and Patricia Greeno, The Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging (Walnut Creek, California: Altmira Press, 1995), 7.
When I was feeling particularly down, I would turn away from the reference texts to a stack of art books I had piled up on my workbench. These books also showed images of objects caught up in various systems of organisation and display: sorted, stacked, boxed, folded, set in vials and vitrines, marked with little labels. Ordinary, used things appeared in careful exhibits or in chaotic assemblages, lined up on shelves or massed onto open floors. I could recognise the texture of these things, their strange quality of abandonment and evocation. Questions of waste and salvage, memory and forgetting seemed to surface again and again in pieces by a few artists—Nikolaus Lang, Susan Hiller, Ilya Kabakov, Mark Dion, Christian Boltanski. Where the texts on artefact classification seemed to mock the work I was doing with the homestead's marginal materials, certain artworks seemed to affirm it, and to open up the possibility of a different model for archival practice. I began to wonder if I could work my way out of the inventory impasse I found myself in.

by paying closer attention to the way these artists recuperated scrappy, degraded objects in their work.

In the book she created to accompany an installation at the Freud Museum in London, Susan Hiller writes:

I've worked by collecting objects, orchestrating relationships, and inventing fluid taxonomies, while not excluding myself from them.... My starting points were arteless, worthless artefacts and materials—rubbish, discards, fragments, trivia and reproductions—which seemed to carry an aura of memory and to hint at meaning something, something that made me want to work with them and on them. 7

In the Freud Museum piece, a series of small boxes hold paired objects and images. A child’s verse about ‘Indian Children’ shares a box with a set of individually bagged potsherds; a photocopy of AIDS statistics shares another with a photo of a memento mori from the Great Plague. Meaning emerges from the alignment of ‘arteless, worthless’ artefacts, and the effect is peculiar—a half-remembered moment, a tentative epiphany, a critical insight. Work like Hiller’s challenged me to imagine my task differently, and in doing so to become receptive to how archival memory might be reworked, reflexively and critically.

The artwork I was drawn to communicated an awareness of the ironies and power relations at work in any attempt at collection or archival practice. I could sense commentaries on the impracticality of total conservation; critiques of the arbitrary or authoritative codes that determine accession and deaccession; observations of the way collections work to transform the objects in their care. In academic articulations of these issues, the materiality of the objects subjected to the ordering schema seems to recede, until only abstractions remain. 8 The works of art, however, combined critique with specificity, and so seemed to offer a model for folding uncertainty into the act of inventory itself, while retaining a focus on the seductive presence of actual materials. Instead of abandoning the inventory project, or settling for a bland recitation, I began to think seriously about how my practice could use the critical resources presented by these artists. In this chapter, I describe how my work with the homestead’s collections drew inspiration and direction from a set

---

of practices not usually associated with social science research. Benjamin once observed. The artistic models I draw on in this chapter let me imagine my collecting practice in this positive, practical sense—turning away from the negative associations I’ve accumulated around my previous attempts.

Before I begin, a word on terms. I refer to the body of material that I gathered at the homestead as a collection, taking this to encompass both artefacts and historical documents. The archive of paper documents nests within the larger context of the collection. The inventory fixes the items into the collection, though in a manner less comprehensive than that offered by a catalogue (where the inventory only lists, the catalogue also numbers, labels, and contextualises). In the literature I cite, the terms ‘archive’ and ‘collection’ sometimes appear with different inflections of meaning.

Impossible inventory

‘The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away’, an installation piece by Soviet artist Ilya Kabakov, revolves around the fictional story of man in a cramped communal apartment who meticulously preserves and catalogues every item that enters his world. Kabakov’s work takes its form as a display of ordinary objects, labelled, dated, and numbered: candy wrappers, scraps of film, pieces of string, old boots, tin cans. Kabakov invents and documents the spectre of a man not able, or not willing, to distinguish between valuable and valueless materials. In a short essay about the piece, Kabakov’s character explains that his obsessive saving is about his memory, the idiosyncratic private realm where everything is equally valuable or significant, and all points of recollection are tied to one another. He acknowledges that, for outsiders, the papers and scraps might appear to be merely garbage, but counters, ‘I feel that it is precisely the garbage, that very dirt where important papers and simple scraps are mixed and unsorted, that comprises the genuine and only real fabric of my life, no matter how ridiculous and absurd this may seem from the outside’.

9 For other attempts to apply contemporary art practice to social scientific research, see Lucy Lippard, The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society (New York: Then New Press, 1997); Christopher Tilley, Sue Hamilton, and Barbara Bender, “Art and the Re-Representation of the Past,” Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 6 (2000).
Open the Randolphs’ kitchen junk drawer and you encounter what might be a similar principle at work. We don’t know what the Randolphs could have been thinking when they filled these drawers, but nothing seems to have escaped from this household collection. It is almost as if, once the habit of saving and salvage began, it couldn’t be stopped. All criteria for selection became untenable, because everything had a possible future use. Scraps of paper, broken buckles, nubs of worn chalk, a label for a lost hat, a knot of wood. A memory, according to Kabokov’s schema, attaches to each of these minor objects; to throw them away is to throw away the memories that fasten to them. Something of this awareness registered with me when I first began to poke around in the drawers. I remember feeling confused about how I would decide whether or not these scraps were worth saving. Each of the things—the snapped measuring tape, the clay marble, the knotted shoelace—marked a moment, a sensation, a trace of experience. Who was I to barge in and discard these ragged things? I was tempted to save them all, to make a list, to open up the possibility of their return. But in order to find the patience to take on this task, I had to, paradoxically, recognise its ultimate absurdity.

The dilemma I found myself in drew attention to the madness of any attempt at total conservation or comprehensive inventory. Susan Hauser writes, ‘The idea of preserving any past for the present and future has become more and more dubious....[C]riteria for selecting what is to be saved no longer appear available. Everything is potentially waste or evidence, depending on the context, so everything must be saved, which is, of course, impossible’. This disintegration of valid criteria leads us to what Boris Groys calls (in reference to Kabokov’s work), ‘The fluid boundary between museum and dump,’ where things can go either way, where ‘the usual distinction between memory and forgetting, between death and survival’, ceases to hold things in place.

Each item I entered in the Excel spreadsheet called attention to this negotiation between conservation and disposal, museum and dump. Dancing plastic bags often escaped the landfill to

---

12 Hauser, 49.
visit the homestead. I would find them snagged on fences or in trees, the cheery smiley face of the Walmart logo promising ‘Another Roll Back to Save You More’. The bags celebrated the ‘reverse affinity’ between the homestead and the landfill, and provoked doubts about the efficacy of my attempts at conservation (how was the Walmart bag to be distinguished from any of the other bags littered around the site?). Kabakov’s work responds to the conundrum posed by the ‘fluid boundary’ with an inventory that is both itself—a comprehensive list of items—and the negation of itself—a commentary on the absurdity of any such attempt. I began to imagine my project as a similar kind of impossible inventory, in which the aim was not to save everything, but to open up a meditation on the thousands of minor decisions that determine what gets saved and what is lost. Curiously enough, my acceptance of the arbitrary nature of my task strengthened, rather than weakened, my resolve.

This doubled agenda gave me the will to continue with my inventory task over the course of the two fieldwork seasons. The creation of the site’s collection became a game with its own sets of rules. In the summer of 2003, the back room of the reconstructed Moon claim shack became the collection’s permanent home. I solicited a donation of metal shelves from the local hardware store and fixed a lock on the door. Once the new space was ready, I would only let myself move a box into it after I’d logged the box’s entire contents into the inventory. Gradually, with the help of a wheelbarrow, I transferred the things into their new home. When my fieldwork ended in October 2003, the inventory recorded a collection of 1060 items: 418 archival paper documents, 478 artefacts, and 172 print items. The paper documents filled six boxes, the artefacts and print material another forty-seven. All of these things were documented on a hard copy inventory printout and backed-up on a CD (a copy of this digital log is included with the thesis as an appendix). Every

---

entry indexed to a box or other location in the storage system. Hundreds of items remained outside
the collection, virtually indistinguishable from the ones inside it.

Unbundling memory

Without the inventory to name and order them, the documents and artefacts in the
homestead’s collection would have been as unremarkable as the heaps of like objects still scattered
around the property (and in the attics and cellars of every other household in the country, as
visitors often reminded me). I lost count of how many people told me about the junk drawers in
their grandmothers’ kitchens, also crammed with string balls and aluminium foil wads. (My own
grandmother kept a sawed off milk jug labelled ‘broken rubber bands’ and filled with the same.) I
transformed the objects by including them in the inventory. An accumulation of commonplace
agricultural and household detritus became a publicly accessible resource (though one only loosely
bound to any institutional agenda). I could sense the objects changing as I re-inscribed them as
‘artefacts’ and ‘documents’. As things moved from jumbled piles on dusty floors and shelves to
numbered boxes on other shelves, the act of spatial displacement rematerialised the matter I
worked with. The objects changed their significance as they moved through different contexts and
as they came into contact with people who asked different things of them.15

Systems of selection and conservation produce, as much as preserve, the items they claim
responsibility for. The element of invasive authority in my work often made me uncomfortable, as I
yanked the things out of their previous contexts and claimed them for the inventory. As I did this,
however, I became aware of ordering logics that preceded my presence at the homestead.
Apparently disordered deposits would turn out to have a hidden pattern imposed by William and
Emma, or some other inhabitant. I began to think about my work as extending, rather than
obscuring, the archival instincts of the people who had left these things behind. I imagined myself
collaborating with their collecting practice, picking up where they left off.16 In doing so, I tried to
refuse the break that would place their work on the other side of an invisible line in the past, and

15 For literature on the way spatial, institutional, and economic displacements affect object identities, see
Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press,
16 Dydia DeLyser, "Tracing Tourisms Past as the Researcher Becomes Collector," in Annual Meeting of the
my work in a sterile, forward-looking present. When I was able to think things this way, I saw the
place as already curated, a collection of objects and documents that, though they may have
appeared illogical and cluttered, retained some of the emotional and experiential content vested in
them by the people who had deposited them. This was mostly, of course, an act of imaginative
empathy. The human intentions behind the accumulation of these things remained ultimately
unknowable. If it pleased me to give some meaning to my impossible inventory by imagining it as
part of a sympathetic practice, then I needed to acknowledge from the outset that my aims in
collecting these things were not equivalent with those of the people who initially gathered them.

The work of Nikolaus Lang touches on similar questions of authority and empathy. One
installation piece, ‘For Mrs. G. Legacy—Food and Religious Hoard’, consists of a lifetime’s
accumulation of diverse material recovered from the home of an elderly German woman. A wide
band made up of dozens of tins and jars rings a white expanse of fabric, on which smaller
household objects and scraps of paper lie arranged carefully, no object allowed to touch any other.
A bench and desk, piled with books and pamphlets, sit nearby. Lang wrote of this piece, ‘At first
glance, we notice only chaos. However, you also recognise hidden order, a structure. The first
doesn’t exist without the latter, in our seeing’. The grouping and classification of these objects
draws out the obscured patterns of selection that hold together any similar set of household
objects. Another piece, ‘To the Götte Brothers and Sisters’, mimics archaeological and
ethnographic practice to display a series of artefacts found in an isolated farming community in
Southern Bavaria. In both pieces, Lang works with abandoned or discarded material traces to offer
a curious, almost reverent, presentation of the belongings of particular individuals. In doing so, he
seems to present himself as someone working in service to the people who left these things, so
retaining some of their agency in the collection and selection of the objects.

One of the homestead’s books, a heavy volume entitled *The Pathway of Life* (by Reverend T.
a strange assortment of things between its mildewed pages. I remember the day Bob Oaks found
the illustrated advertising brochure, for ‘Sorosis Shoes’, which displayed a range of fashionable,

---

17 Sandra Koelle collected this caption when she visited the piece in a Berlin exhibition in 2003. Volker Hecht
provided the translation.

18 Lang’s work came to be associated with the German term, *Spurensicherer*, ‘one who discovers and records
traces’. Putnam, 71.
high-cut 1906 ladies' footwear. Someone had written 'Treasures from the poetic world Chicoga [sic]' across the face of the brochure. His interest piqued, Bob went on to find in the Pathway a cardboard cut-out of a Victorian Santa Claus; a card claiming to contain 'A Flower from the Christ Land' (a pressed sprig of *Adonis palaestina* disintegrated to all but dust); a calendar clipping of young woman in a daisy-speckled field caressing her horse's mane; a newspaper clipping from April 24, 1917 with the lyrics to the Battle Hymn of the Republic; and a hazy photograph of a young boy, annotated on the back, "This is Effie Boy, John H Chandler". The book seemed to serve as Emma Randolph's 'sentimental album', her version of the collections of pressed flowers, keepsakes, poems, locks of hair, and drawings popular among women a generation earlier.  

The Randolphs' quirky collections appeared in other places as well. In the course of my research, I came across dozens of string-tied 'bundles'. Each one contained an assortment of documents, notes, forms and correspondence. William acted as his own archivist—or perhaps Emma made these bundles, sweeping up loose papers in periodic bouts of household clearance. One typical, mildewed packet salvaged from the root cellar contained William's sketch of a 'decoy periscope' on the back of an envelope; several produce purchase receipts; some correspondence related to a mining venture; a 1940 property assessment; a leather snap wallet holding an obituary for a janitor at the University (William listed as a pallbearer); a 1937 Lolo National Forest map; an application for a cattle brand change; a USDA circular on Diseases of Cattle; a land conservation program application; airmail letters from Los Angeles business associate Mr. Sibley; a government flyer claiming "Food Will Win the War and Write the Peace"; a few polite rejection letters from the Office of Inventions in Washington; and an assortment of scrappy notes, addresses, and names. Although all of the items seemed to date roughly from a five-year period between 1937 and 1942, there was no other visible organizing principle. Each time I opened a bundle like this I felt a rush of curiosity, the satisfaction of 'untying the string' described by Steedman at work in more

---

conventional archival spaces. Often, the satisfaction gave way to bewilderment, as I disclosed the mass of inscrutable detail and was faced with the task of sorting it. Inevitably, once I’d slipped things into the themed archival files I wished I could go back to the moment before the string fell away, when the things still held the pattern given them by William (or Emma’s) hoarding hand.

When I began to log these and other minor items into the inventory, I realised that they formed their own discontinuous chronology of intimate experience. The inventory recorded the day in 1937 when the potatoes went into the ground, an envelope-flap notation of hay hauling dates in 1942, the clay collected by neighbour Eddy Suneson on December 6, 1934, near Plains, Montana. Similar records wove out of the space of the inventory into the fabric of place. On the east wall of the bedroom on the old farmhouse someone had written, ‘Dec. 22, 1941. Bright, beautiful day. Sun shined 9:30 morning 3 o’clock’. Next to this notation is a series of indecipherable hatch marks and

---

20 Steedman, 72. Another bundling association sometimes occurred to me as well, a connection to the medicine bundles maintained by the Blackfoot tribe of Montana. These bundles contained collections of objects and materials associated with certain healing powers. Tradition stipulated that these bundles had to be ‘sung open’ to protect the power they contained. In a conversation with historian Bill Farr, he suggested that perhaps there were songs I needed to know release the meaning of the strange bundles at the homestead. William E Farr, "Troubled Bundles, Troubled Blackfeet: The Travail of Cultural and Religious Renewal," in Montana Legacy: Essays on History, People, and Place, ed. Harry W Fritz, Mary Murphy, and Robert R Swartout (Helena, MT: Montana Historical Society Press, 2002).
crosses, perhaps a record of where the sun hits the wall of the dim room in midwinter.

On a few occasions, the collaboration between the homestead's previous inhabitants and me seemed more than symbolic. One morning I sat dutifully filling in entries for the inventory, trying to force the scraps to yield essential descriptive information—date of production, item provenance. I had reached the small file of children's artwork, and was writing things like: 'Crayon drawing, n.d., Ione Randolph, image of kitchen'. The absurdity of the task had begun to get to me, and I thought about taking a break. Then, I picked up a yellowed piece of lined paper inscribed with the faint outlines of two tiny hands and a foot. Inside the foot, someone had neatly written: 'Pencil drawing of Dolly's foot, Feb. 20th 1901'. I entered the date into the inventory, bemused and slightly alarmed.

On another day, while clearing jars of murky, ancient preserves from the root cellar shelves, I came upon a jar containing not mouldy produce, but a single envelope with a 1958 postmark. I unscrewed the rust-gritted top to find a document of deed transfer, sent to Robert Randolph and eventually, inexplicably, deposited in the root cellar for preservation among the stewed tomatoes and pickled rhubarb.

These moments of uncanny assistance occurred infrequently. More often, I was faced with deposits of apparent randomness. In a heap of material in the homestead farmhouse, I found a crushed plastic box with a set of instructions printed on the bottom: 'After taking out the contents, remove loose cardboard parts and use the box for your handkerchiefs, collars, and so on. The top label may be removed if desired by moistening it thoroughly.' The box contained the following items:

1 stub of a red builder's pencil
1 section of a silver watchcase
4 buttons of various sizes
1 white bean
1 brown paper scrap, with 'Sec 20, Range 5 East, Township 18 North' written on it in pencil
1 set of instructions for 'Cutter Bacterins' blackleg and malignant enema medication
1 gob of wax
1 white cotton rag
125 tomato seeds (variety 'Condon's Giant Everbearing') in a paper envelope
1 safety pin
1 small rubber band
1 silver sequin
3 elongate scraps of black rubber
1 bent nail with yellow paint on the head
1 piece of orange sandstone
1 chunk of wood
What principle gathered the bean and the button, the seeds and the sequin, together in the plastic box? The contents of the crushed box had no evident relation to each other, but chance—and perhaps some obscured intent—had gathered them together. I considered sorting out these fragments, placing the pencil with other loose pencils, the safety pin in a jar for future use, the buttons in another box. But I couldn’t bring myself to break up this possible rebus, and the contents of the crushed plastic box remained intact, awaiting the person who could read the order in their arrangement.

By making room for the collecting and hoarding practice of the people who left these things behind, by allowing them to collaborate in the construction of the archive, this curious inventory practice offered a subtle critique of the systems of authority and discretion that usually structure work with material remains. In a sense, I tried to retain the potential charge of memory in these things, to treat them as if they were still bound up in individual patterns of collection and recollection—even though I could encounter this memory in only in glimpses, through acts of imagination and empathetic identification. The sharing of authorship for the collection also opened up another set of possibilities.

William was a collector of butterflies, fossils, and stones. I found remnants of his phantom collections at the homestead—a stray wing tacked to cardboard, a box of crumbling stones—but the specimens could be difficult to tell apart from other deposits of organic material. Rodent caches of seeds and bedding material mingled with human hoards of kindling twigs, feathers, saved seeds. A few coffee tins in the harness shed contained cherry stones and plum pits carefully eaten down to the woody centre and then drilled with a small hole, through which the
centre of the pit had been extracted. The ambiguous status of these things defied any attempt to
distinguish between human ‘collection’ and animal ‘accumulation’. The traces of deliberate animal
hoarding were just as evident as human hoarding, and the whole mass seemed impossibly mixed.
After a while, I adopted a more expansive approach to the ordering impulses in the homestead’s
matter. I inventoried the jars of pits along with the jars of crop seed.

On forgetting

I remember the day in May 2002 when I unpacked the wooden barrel in the farmhouse’s
back room. I pulled out cotton sheets stitched together out of smaller squares of fabric, flour sack
dish towels, and blousy dresses. The fabric formed a cool mass, settled with age into the strange
container (which did seem to have kept the mice and moths at bay). When I pulled the last sheet
out of the bottom of the barrel, I uncovered a January 1956 McCall’s magazine cover, graced by a
perky woman in a flat-brim hat. Two jaundiced copies of the Missoulian lay beneath the magazine. I
pulled out one of the newspapers. The headline news on June 24, 1956 concerned the late spring
flood that had just swept through the region. An inside page carried a feature on dairy farming in
Western Montana. I recognised this edition of the Missoulian, having come across several identical
copies in other parts of the farmhouse. On a hunch, I flipped to the obituary page, and saw this
item:

W.H. Randolph, 84, 1410 Worden Ave, died Saturday evening at his home. Mr. Randolph
was born Feb. 6, 1872, in Missouri. He came to Missoula in 1905, and began ranching the
following year. He had lived here since. His wife, Emma H., died last Jan. 3...

Inside the McCall’s, between the pages of an
article about Jacques Cousteau’s family life, I
found some folded layers of paper towel
wrapped around a bunch of desiccated
carnations. Red pencil handwriting on the
towel read, ‘Flowers. Dad Randolph. June 26-
56’.

21 Jean Baudrillard, Le Systeme Des Objets (Paris: Gallimard, 1968); Susan M Pearce, "The Urge to Collect," in
These souvenirs mark the desire to hold on to a trace of an individual life, but they call attention instead to life's transience. The flowers grow brittle and decay; the newspaper obituary fades and yellows. Souvenirs work to mark 'events whose materiality has escaped us', Susan Stewart comments. Confronted with objects like those in the barrel, I had to acknowledge that the impulse to save and to hold material remnants can work to generate deeply ambivalent effects. The act of preservation, though it claims to protect a memory trace in a physical object, can work most powerfully to remind the person who encounters the preserved object of loss and absence. When I found the crushed carnations, all I could think about was the sadness of the gesture, and its ultimate futility. I wondered if my own work to assemble a collection of the homestead's artefacts, to do the work of memory, would have a similar effect on someone who came across it in the future.

I often encountered such souvenir objects, and each time I had to ask myself the same question. On May 7, 1905, William collected a nosegay of tiny flowers at Fort Sheridan, Arlington, West Virginia, while he was visiting the East Coast to meet with a patent lawyer in Washington D.C. He brought the flowers home to Emma, who placed them in an empty Godiva chocolate box with a note recording the date and place of collection. At some point, a mass of human hair wrapped in a *Daily Missoulian* from September 15, 1947 came to join the disintegrating flowers in the box. I opened the box last summer, the hair gone rank and musty.

Human remains express the paradoxical nature of the souvenir most powerfully, perhaps. Saved as mementos of particular lives, they become emblems of mortality. I found a plait of fine, brown hair in an envelope from the Phelps Hotel in White Sulphur Springs, Montana, where William and Emma lived when their first two boys were small. Written on the outside of the envelope in Emma's handwriting are the words, 'Elmer Keith Randolph, hair December 14th 1905 the first time it was ever cut. this[sic] is the front lock braid. Elmer K. Randolph was born July 20, 1901'. Emma saved this strand of her child's hair as a materialised memory of his infancy, and now it sits in the homestead's archive to witness the erosion of that memory, and the passage of time.

---

In his work, Christian Boltanski creates inventories and archives that explore this grey borderland between remembering and forgetting: a set of shelving crammed with used children’s clothing entitled ‘Children’s Museum Storage Area’; an archive of personal documents and keepsakes called ‘Search for and presentation of everything that remains of my childhood, 1944-50’; a set of deposit boxes for family memorabilia entitled ‘The Lost Workers’. For Richard Hobbs, Boltanski’s work asks ‘how the archive can counter the erosion of identity’ and the inevitability of death. But, as Hobbs points out, Boltanski’s works also ironically subvert the archive’s claim to authenticity and preservation. Many of the items in his presentations turn out to be fakes; the ephemerality of most of these pieces runs counter to the perpetual storage idealised by the archival form. Even as he exposes its absurdity, however, Boltanski holds onto the archive as ‘an imperfect but precious means of accessing a lost past’, both deeply flawed and profoundly necessary.

Folding boxes

I cleared out the homestead’s former milkhouse and scrubbed down the walls during my first fieldwork season. This compact rectangular structure, with a deep, waist level wooden shelf running around the interior walls, became a micro-museum and a rudimentary visitors’ centre. During the summer of 2002 it contained a frequently rearranged (by me and by others) exhibit of the kitchen junk drawer contents. In 2003, I decided to try something slightly different in this space. When I cleared out the room initially, I found a stacked package of folding cedar boxes on a high shelf. These containers (roughly four inches square) seemed to have been designed to hold soft fruit for sale, but they had obviously never been used. I decided to use these boxes to display things people found at the homestead over the course of the summer in an evolving exhibit. There would be no set criteria for inclusion of an object, except that things needed to be found within the area circumscribed by the homestead’s fenced boundaries. I seeded the display with a few of my

26 Ibid.: 123.
favourite things: a handful of found marbles; a cache of seed pits marked with rodent-gnawed holes; the fragmentary sheep image I write about in the next chapter.

The exhibit grew slowly over the course of the season. Will, a young man who apprenticed with me for a few weeks, contributed a combination compass/whistle he'd found in the winch shed. Co-worker Molly selected a newspaper ad for 'Sideboard Whiskey' salvaged from the Moon shack walls. One small boy decided to donate a desiccated orange and matching golf ball, discovered in the chicken coop and the tall grass, respectively. When preliminary work on Bill's house turned up two tarnished 1892 tokens from the 'Vote for Bozeman' for state capitol campaign, these were included, as was a light bulb a carpenter found while working on the Moon shack demolition. Other visitors offered their treasures: the tiny leg of an unborn deer; a mass of knapweed seed-heads; a rubber squeeze-toy dog. I added two pellets dropped by the short-eared owls who lived in the plum thicket, and an assortment of skeleton keys found in a heart-shaped tin in a collapsed shed.

Each of the disparate things had a story to tell. The handful of broken eggshell and feathers, found at the entrance to a badger's hole, recalled the rash of unexplained chicken killings that took place in September. The fragment of wooden pipe found at the top of the orchard remembered an obsolete irrigation system and the extinct technology that had pipes made out of biodegradable material. Some stories seemed to be simply about the moment of discovery. In one box, on a piece of mirror, I placed the giant, swirled marble I found coated with grime at the back of a shelf in the tack shed. The exhibit offered a materialisation of
these moments, small encounters between the materiality of the place and the people who moved around it, looking, touching, smelling. At the end of the season, I lined each of the twenty-four boxes in the exhibit with a piece of folded fabric from the homestead scrap bag.

During the annual fall gathering, when over a hundred people visited the homestead for the evening, I hung around in the background trying to catch the odd comment about the exhibit. Some people seemed perplexed about the way the boxes juxtaposed apparently dissimilar objects. What did a cattle vertebra have in common with a 1934 Liberty Head dime? Expecting an exhibit about the homestead’s history, they got something else. A scrap of 1909 newspaper reporting on ‘Women’s Independence Fruitful Source of Material Unrest’, a dried sheep dropping. The exhibit didn’t seem to distinguish historic and contemporary artefacts, or make any distinction between artificial and natural curiosities. In an unassuming way, it opted out of the processes of discrimination and discernment that underpin most collection schemes.

In this, it emulated work constructed by artist Mark Dion. In a series of ‘digs’ over the course of the 1990s, Dion involved dozens of people in scavenging material fragments from places like the Thames foreshore, the muck at the bottom of Venetian canals, and the cellar of a burnt-out bar in Bedford, Massachusetts. With a team of volunteers, Dion sorted, cleaned, and classified these artefacts and then displayed them in a series of attractive wooden cabinets. The resulting works seem to mimic archaeological practice, and yet refuse the usual codes of disciplinary authority and strict classification that structure such work. Bottle caps appear arranged by colour and size; plastic toy parts share display space with apparently precious ceramic shards. Dion traces his practice to 16-18th century ‘wunderkammer’, or cabinets of curiosities, and 19th century natural history collections—both products of a time before rigid boundaries divided scientific practice and the production of knowledge retained a democratic, collaborative aspect.

The fruit box collection, though minute compared to Dion’s orchestrated events, also highlights the way collections might be organised around active curiosity, rather than informed curatorial selection. I remember the comment of one young visitor: ‘This place just makes you want to excavate, and find things out’. Last summer I supervised a group of children as they sifted through the pile of soil that had been removed from the underfloor of the Moon shack. They spent hours on their knees, ‘digging’ with enthusiasm. Their tiniest ‘finds’ ended up in an exhibit box: a
skull and crossbones pendant, a 1972 penny, a red rubber washer, a broken plastic comb, a small hinge, two rusty scraps of metal. These things belonged in the exhibit not because they were particularly valuable archaeological artefacts, but because they had been found, and the fact of the finding made them eligible for the curious collection. As with Dion's work, such collaborative, process-oriented work 'challenges the authoritative role assumed by specialists in order to reinstate more open possibilities'. 27 The exhibit opened up the act of collection not only to overlooked traces of past lives, but to the material evidence of our own presence: the orange misplaced by a child on a school trip, the rubber squeak-toy dog that may have belonged to any of the dogs that have lived at the homestead over the last several years.

27 Alex Coles, "The Epic Archaeological Digs of Mark Dion," in Archaeology, ed. Alex Coles and Mark Dion (London: Black Dog, 1999), 29.
The fruit box exhibit can be understood as a supplement to the inventoried collection, an evolving vernacular wunderkammer that gathers in assorted scraps of the homestead's materiality. The cedar folding boxes function as small, lidless complements to the cardboard archive boxes where the inventoried objects live. The exhibit, like the rest of the strategies I've been describing in this chapter, proposes a tactic through which alternative curation might critically and playfully examine the way things get selected, sorted, and preserved in the name of memory. A colleague recently mentioned a comment he once heard Hans-Peder Steensby, a Professor of Geography at Copenhagen, make in the course of a conference: 'How differently we would view collections if we were able to see more clearly how objects were selected in relation to the many that were passed over'. The collections I have been playing with try to offer a glimpse of this world of 'dispossessed shards'.

Site specific inventory

This chapter has been working through some of the tensions that arise out of applying inventory and collection practice to a deposit of borderline objects in a particular place. Before I bring my discussion to a close, I want to explore one more aspect of the homestead collection's subtle unorthodoxy. When a curator selects an object for accession into a collection, this usually means that the object's characteristics conform to the institutional criteria that structure that collection. It is not generally necessary for an artefact to remain in the place where it was produced or used in order to retain its collectable quality (and in fact the value of many artefacts depends on their spatial displacement from an initial location). On accession, the curator records the object's provenance as part of the catalogue documentation, but the new system effectively strips the object of any binding association with a pre-collection context. Unlike historic buildings, which have to stay in place where they were constructed in order to retain their 'historic value', historic artefacts are allowed to travel, and expected to maintain their integrity as they move through different

29 Stewart.
locations. Once an object has become fixed within the logic of the collection, its value ostensibly becomes portable, transferable.

The homestead’s collection of bent tin cans, string balls, torn documents, and broken tools undermines this state of affairs, a bit. To put it simply, these objects don’t travel well. They couldn’t even make the short trip down the hill to the University of Montana archive or the local historical museum. The archivists and curators of these public collections failed to see any transferable value in the homestead’s scrappy things, and there was no grand narrative to elevate their status from rubbish to relic. None of the Randolph sons went on to be a senator; Teddy Roosevelt didn’t sleep in the bunkhouse on one of his Wild West hunting expeditions. Because the artefacts are so minor and muddled, they have very little value out of context. Housed in a collection on site, however, the objects accrue an interpretive value as elements of the homestead’s idiosyncratic texture and

30 I discussed this phenomenon with Bob Brown, the director of the Historical Museum at Fort Missoula, in spring 2002. Two of the structures at the site (the Slide Rock Lookout and the Grant Creek Schoolhouse) have no ‘historic value’ because they have lost the context that would legitimate them.

31 Of course, the movement of things has complex and unpredictable effects, as much recent work has shown. A travelling object may not change its form as it moves from one place to another, but its meaning morphs constantly as it moves through cultures and codes of value. James Clifford, Routes: Travel and Translation in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display (Washington: Smithsonian, 1991), Thomas.
character. The collected artefacts work against the decontextualisation of the ethnographic or museum object by insisting on their specificity, a spatiality of scrappiness.

The inventory, in this sense, works almost like a site-specific artwork in which the production, presentation, and reception of the piece works through and out of a particular location. The inventory's integrity relies, at least in part, on a mediation between the things contained within it and the homestead's ramshackle sheds, the surround of arid hills, the dump across the way, the jogger on the ridgeline path, the deer sheltered in the orchard, the bounding fences, the distant hum of the interstate, the shifting mass of the black locust trees, the neighbours in their pick-up herding cattle on the upper fields.

The binding of materiality and place continued once the objects entered the collection. People regularly borrowed objects and supplies when they were needed elsewhere. Things from the boxes and files often moved back out into the homestead's sheds, fences, fields, and structures. One woman, who had picked up an old shirt from the farmhouse and decided to continue to mend it where someone left off the task decades earlier, needed to replace some missing buttons. I typed 'button' into the Excel inventory and located three boxes with eligible supplies. When the buttons left the collection, I entered a note in the 'storage' line of their entry: 'removed for use in Jenn's mending, August 2003'. Other things—screws and hook latches, containers, small tools—made their way back out into the world when needed for minor repairs or new construction, a process I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4. The collection turned itself inside out, as artefacts appeared on window frames and workbenches. Glass jugs were scrubbed to hold autumn cider. A wooden 'Drink Squirt' crate acted as my all-purpose hauling box. Little notes appeared in the inventory boxes with explanations for absent artefacts.

Like household collections of second-hand goods that also serve for everyday use, the homestead's practical collection sidestepped conventional collecting practices of displacement, sacralisation, and display. Krzysztof Pomian holds that in order for a group of objects to qualify as a collection, the objects must lose their use-value and enter a protected realm out of economic circulation. Collected things are expected to have aesthetic or historic significance, or confer prestige, but they are not expected to do physical work. The homestead's collection didn't follow

33 Pomian.
this prescription. The collection, in this instance, became a place of reactivation as much as a space of preservation. The potential for eventual re-use allowed the things to retain some of their previous character, as latently practical things that just need to be held onto long enough for their intended function to make itself known. The reuse calls attention to the labour of doing and undoing the inventory, physical labour usually naturalised into the system of order constructed within such collections. Gradually, all of the things in the collection may return to active duty; when this happens, the record of their temporary enlistment in the collection will persist only in the annotated inventory, and in a room full of boxes, empty but for a drift of small notes about absent things. The collection creates a distinction between object and site only to collapse it through gradual dispersals and intentional reuse.

I don’t intend, by making these claims about the complex binding and co-constitution of place and material, to suggest that there was something inherently unique about the way these processes unfolded at the homestead, or that the objects were fated to remain in place in perpetuity. Miwon Kwon cautions, in her work on art practices, against the tendency for site-specific works to reinforce place-bound identities through a locational essentialism that denies more fluid, inclusive
understandings of place and self. Kwon calls for a double mediation that finds 'a terrain between mobilisation and specificity—to be out of place with punctuality and precision'. In this vein, I should acknowledge the transgressive materialities that troubled the homestead's—and the inventory's—borders. Last summer I came upon a strange document near the chicken coop during fire season, when I had been without visitors for days due to the closure of the hills. It appeared to be a page torn from a Chinese calculus textbook. A few weeks later I picked a Yugoslavian coin (a 1965 20 dinar piece) from the dusty road. I could come up with no plausible explanations for how these bits of mobile cultural matter came to rest at the homestead. The border-crossing artefacts reminded me that the lines I had drawn around the site and its material residues were partly fictional, and that place itself was porous, with no clear membrane between its inside and its outside, the here and the there.

But these examples are too obvious, perhaps, and the real challenge lies elsewhere. The question of site-specificity turns to other concerns: how to make collections that remain open to inconsistencies in their systematic ordering, and to displacements that trouble the phantom of a coherent, bounded site. Georges Perec once commented, 'Anyway, I know that if I classify, if I make inventories, somewhere there are going to be events that will step in and throw the order out'. The trick is to retain some kind of coherence in the inventory while remaining receptive to the events that step in, the unexpected and the destabilising effects that can infect the process of inventory. This receptivity can be profoundly unsettling, partly because it requires an openness to the possibility of a reverse classification, when the inventory and its objects can seem to act of their own will to trouble subjective experiences of materiality and place. Last July, I found two scraps of brown paper in the kitchen cupboard—thick black crayon script scrawled across torn paper. When I tried to make out the words written there I could only make out: 'Missoula' and 'London'. I tried to read something else off the scraps and failed, uneasily aware that the scraps had anticipated my presence here, my oscillating academic life. I may have been imagining things, but the effect registered nonetheless as a haunting reminder of both the situatedness of my task and its inevitable dispersions, through space as well as time.

34 Miwon Kwon, One Place after Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).
35 Ibid., 166.
Closing the door

I logged the last item into the inventory in October 2003, the day before my return to England to write this thesis. Snow flurries chased through the suddenly chilly autumn air, and I remembered the day eighteen months earlier when the snow had sifted through the open windows of Bill’s old bedroom as I washed down the sooty walls. I had finished what I came to do, but I couldn’t help but feeling that the work remained essentially incomplete, arbitrarily abbreviated. In the end, I have little control over the way the homestead’s collection evolves in my absence or how it comes to be used. As Thomas Osborne observes,

The archive is there to serve memory, to be useful, but its ultimate ends are necessarily indeterminate. It is deposited for many purposes; but one of its potentialities is that it awaits a constituency or a public whose limits are of necessity unknown...It is never a matter of just revealing a given truth that is to be found there.38

On one level, of course, I’d like to think that the inventory I’ve established will retain its order perpetually, an obedient collection of things arrayed for research and browsing by a respectful

---

public. On another level, I recognise the impossibility of this desire, and its antagonism to all of the themes I work with in this thesis.

Pierre Nora, in his *Lieux de Memoire*, critiques the role the archive has come to play in contemporary culture. The archive, Nora argues, claims to preserve memory but it actually offers a static surrogate to take the place of what he calls, 'lived' or 'true' memory, which he defines as that memory which works through gestures and habits, traditional skills and unstudied reflexes. 'Memory has been wholly absorbed into [the archive's] meticulous reconstruction', he writes. 39 I accept that the decision to archive the documents and collect the objects at the homestead actively produced a set of meanings where there had been mostly incoherence or indifference. The inventory worked to make things legible, and as such it established certain opportunities and directions for the appreciation of what has gone before, while eliminating other opportunities. 40 'Our keeping and ordering became itself constitutive of the archive: we were giving meaning and value as we sought to give order', and in this sense we were working kind of archival intervention Nora laments. 41

What I don’t accept, however, is that the kind of memory work performed by the archive must necessarily lead to a static understanding of the past. I hope I have shown how it might be possible to work down the margin between art and archive where memory continues to live, to shift and twist. This is not Nora's nostalgic living memory of peasant ritual and extinct sensibilities, but a lived memory that arises out of arranging and re-arranging material remnants. Such memory work remains open to the echoes of past experience even as it folds imperceptibly into the present and the future. It insists that when we arrange the material residues of the past in our impossible inventories, they rearrange us in turn. The homestead’s collection will only serve its purpose if it continues to change, to accept additions and omissions, to remain in formation. This may mean that all of its contents will move out into the fabric of the site to serve other functions, or that the mice will move into the archive boxes to set up house. It may mean that someone will come along and decide to reorganize all of the files, or that the whole collection will reach some watershed historic value and be spirited away for proper conservation. I don’t know what lies in store for the

things I've placed in the collection, but I'm fairly certain they will continue to tell their own stories.

In the following chapters, I turn to another set of stories that take place, for the most part, outside the room in the Moon’s claim shack where the collection came to be housed. I’ve already mentioned how the production of the inventoried collection acted as scaffolding for the research as a whole. While I worked with the objects, I watched what happened to the things. I tried out different ways of sorting, selecting, and displaying the material, and diverted things from the inventory to other locations and functions. Each of the different tactics I describe in the chapters to follow relies, in some way, on the work I have discussed here.
b. Once bitten

The crate sat against the stone wall of the root cellar in a heap of rubbish—rusted-out kettles, cornhusks, cans, splayed barrel-staves. In the cellar gloom, the wood-slatted box appeared to be full of small containers, all coated with coarse dust. I carried the crate through the red door to the light, where I could read the pencilled script on the topmost box: ‘Valentines, 1952, W.H.R’. A red cardboard heart nested within the labelled box held a stack of birthday and Valentine cards, as well as two California post-marked airmail envelopes addressed to Mr. Wm H. Randolph, Missoula, Mont.

Intrigued, I looked to the next layer in the crate. ‘CHEW DAYS WORK TOBACCO’, ‘CHEW HORSESHOE TOBACCO’, read the labels on a stack of rectangular grey cartons. The first one I opened contained twenty corroded clip-on metal tabs, with the words ‘Days Work’ enamelled on their faces; three shotgun shells; one grease pencil; a cattle ear tag (No. 2); a clock winding key; one drill bit; two six-cent air mail stamps; a label printed with holly; an American Legion badge; a small roll of red fabric; a tack; two screws; and a dark brown marble with a spot of white paint on it. A crumpled paper note found in the jumble read, ‘May 31, ’34. Bonnie had her tooth pulled 2 often’.

An identical tobacco carton held (along with more screws, nails, marbles, and tacks) a ‘Chase and Sanborn’ coffee bag with a few lumps of coal inside, a label from the end of a spool of linen thread, and another gift label addressed, ‘To Dad, 12-25-25. Bob and Keith’. Below these two collections, in a third tobacco carton, I found a tarnished silver pocket watch on a bed of sawdust.
Someone had scratched the initials 'WHR' onto the watch's backside. A fourth carton held a red rubber ball (lightly gnawed), a piece of oilcloth, a plant fossil, a skein of thread, and two three-cent stamps (commemorating the 4-H program and the 50th anniversary of the trucking industry).

Tobacco cartons number five and six were archival in nature. 'Receipts and Taxes' [sic], read the hand-written label on the lid of one. The collection of documents within included tax assessments from the early 1930s for the Randolphs' two 160-acre quarter sections of land and a smaller five-acre parcel in township thirteen north, range nineteen west, Missoula County, Montana. The box labelled, 'Paid Insurance Cards to Nove. 3 1942' held a stack of 3 by 5 inch printed cards from the Missoula Benefit Society. Each card announced the death or disfigurement of a Society Member and requested $1, payable to the deceased or injured party's relatives.

The clutter in the crate's bottom layer disclosed more riches. One box housed eleven pairs of spectacles, another marble, and two silver clips; an adjacent carton held seventeen empty spectacle cases with rust-seized hinges; and a third yet more (mostly broken) spectacles and cloudy lenses. Alongside the spectacle hoard I found a cache of coal fragments; a broken pocket knife with a mother-of-pearl handle; a detached 'Ford' crest; and a plastic comb. A few scraps of paper lay in the sour grit of dust and insect husks at the bottom of the crate. I pulled out a pencil sketch of a sheath-like 'battleship protector', an application for store credit, and an obituary for H. W. Power
of Conrad, Montana. Relieved to have reached the bottom, I tipped the gritty residue onto the grass and almost missed the bullet and the tooth when they dislodged from the dust.

Stain and decay yellowed the enamel of what appeared to be an adult molar. I pulled the note about Bonnie’s tooth out of the pile. ‘May 31, 34 Bonnie had her tooth pulled 2 often’, I read again. I wasn’t convinced they belonged together, tooth and note, until I noticed reddish brown marks on the scrap of folded paper (apparently torn from a magazine page). When I placed the tooth on the note the curious stains matched up with the bite pattern on the molar. Once wrapped in this note, the tooth had long ago escaped to anonymity in the bottom of the crate. Now, reunited with its documentation, the tooth recorded a painful moment in one woman’s life.

Who was Bonnie? Who pulled her tooth, and what tool did they use to yank it out? A pair of pliers? A piece of string tied to a doorknob? Did Bonnie have one tooth (this tooth?) pulled too often, or just teeth, generally? Why record her discomfort with a note? Why save the tooth? And how did it end up in a crate with a silver pocketwatch and a bag of coal, a marble and a handful of screws?

Some of the questions I could answer. Bonita (I don’t know her original surname) married Keith Randolph in about 1930 and came to stay on his parents’ farm a few years later. She and her
three small daughters lived in a refurbished outbuilding while Keith travelled the Northwest looking for employment. Her daughters remember those years as difficult ones for their mother, full of hard work and worry. I don’t know much more than that. As a mnemonic, the tooth perplexes, seems to record a memory better off forgotten. Maybe she had a swig of whiskey to numb the pain after the home dentistry operation. Maybe her father-in-law (for it is his handwriting on the note) slipped the tooth into a pocket and later stowed it away with other saved things. I wonder if I should be telling this story at all, or if the tooth’s story is better left in the cellar, where it sat for half a century in the dark.
CHAPTER THREE
Recollections

No rain

Ray Moon’s 1889 claim shack had slipped further into its ruined state when I returned to the homestead in 2002. A crater rimmed by splintered boards and loose shingles filled one of the two rooms where the roof should have been. Under the remaining roof section, a few slim box elder saplings poked up through the rotten floorboards. Only a sheath of grey, weathered clapboards held the decrepit structure together. On one of my first days back, my sister (who had become the homestead’s caretaker in my absence) led me to the east end of this sorry building and pointed to a spot just above eye level, next to a fruit crate shelf. There, in faint pencil on the soft lumber, I could just make out these words:


The script, though shaky (the text was placed high avoid the drips from the gutterless eave, an awkward reach for an arm with a pencil), was recognisable as that of William Randolph, who would have been sixty-one that summer.

The scrawled note triggered a cascade of different thoughts, shuttling between the universal and the particular. In 1933, a decade-long drought and the economic depression had already taken their toll on Montana farmers. The iconography of the era—dusty fieldscapes, overload jalopies, stricken faces and work-scarred bodies—lived on in the documentary photos of Roosevelt’s Farm Security Administration. But the note jogged an intimate sensation of one person’s experience. His water-starved crop all but destroyed by hail, a terrible end to an already difficult summer, William recorded his disappointment on the walls of a rundown shack, and I sensed his experience through the trace he left behind. Below the ‘no rain’ note, a few broken bits of text appeared to read: Cherries
in full bloom... May 10, 1931... May... to Dec 30, 1933... 400...... all dug. ... Beautiful. The fading text on the shack marked the human impulse to slow down time, to document moments as they rush by into forgetfulness. Looking at the text on the wall, I thought about the dry well a few yards away, and the plough next to it, now surrounded by rotting stacks of lumber. Irrigation is a perennial problem in Montana’s arid climate; the hills turn brown by late June and are tinder dry in the searing August heat. I knew the labour required to grow a garden in these challenging conditions, the countless buckets hauled to water even a small plot. When we walked away from the shack, we passed by the tree where a heap of junk lay piled. I noticed a few buckets among the broken machine parts and scrap metal, each one of them rusted through at the bottom. I wondered when the buckets, now hauling nothing but stray leaves and insect husks, last hauled water to a thirsty plant or cow.

Makeshift memory

Things, especially marginal things, can accrue significance in relation that they do not have in isolation. The anecdote above is one example of this principle at work. William’s note initiated a string of linked reflections. I ended up musing about a few rusty buckets in a junk heap, buckets I would never have given a second glance without the chain of reflection that set them in relation to a document of one summer’s desperation, a dry well, some memorable photographs of other people in other places. Alignment with the other materials brought the buckets into focus, and animated a residual memory of their previous use. Understanding worked through a process of loose association, touching on different objects along the way.

The homestead offered many opportunities for this sort of serendipitous, associative
thinking. As I spent more time there, I often came upon arbitrary juxtapositions that seemed to generate a sudden recognition—whether it was the surreal symmetry of a doll’s head and a candlestick, or the veiled commentary of a newspaper editorial overlaid with the dry husks of insect bodies. I appreciated these found collages, but I often found myself tempted to meddle with them, to nudge the things just slightly into relations that would expose something more than a casual epiphany (but less than a comprehensive explanatory account). I began to wonder how I might draw out the potency of these makeshift alignments of material and memory without forcing a closure that neutralised their fragile significance.

While thinking about how to apply this half-formed question to the homestead’s materials, I began to store up a collection of miscellaneous resonant objects. The collection didn’t have a physical existence, just a virtual one in a file on my laptop. When I came across something that seemed to promise a connection or association, I would enter a description of it into an expanding document where a jumble of things came to rest in digital proximity. I looked for materials that seemed to suggest an affinity with other materials, either through a principle of confirmation or one of disjuncture and irony. Vague themes emerged as I fit the pieces into place, but the contents shifted each time I returned to the writing. Many of the materials seemed to concentrate in the 1930s, perhaps because my own stores of cultural imagination contained a well-stocked inventory for this era. I let the concentration be, grateful for some hint of coherence as the document swelled to take in descriptions of more scraps, more suggestive fragments.

I’ve tried at least half a dozen ways of arranging this textual ragbag. At one point, I used a found 1932 Missoulian newspaper to organise clusters of text under the topics proposed by the headlines, but the authoritative tone in the news articles swamped the speculative fragments I’d gathered together. Later, I used a set of oral history anecdotes to provide a counter-structure to work my collections against, but the opposition between oral and material recollection wouldn’t hold up (although pieces of that effort remain in this version). This chapter is my last attempt, and though I’m not entirely convinced, it’s the best I’ve been able to come up with so far. In it, I form a linked series of ‘constellations’—with a nod to Walter Benjamin. I should make it clear that although I am trying, as did Benjamin, to salvage a scrap of history from the refuse ('What for
others are deviations are for me the data which determine my course', I hesitate to make any
dialectical claims for the approach I use here. Benjamin's montage method aimed to 'awaken
history' from its slumber, to 'unsettle the dust' that masked the revolutionary content buried in
ordinary, outmoded objects. If there are moments of 'profane illumination' when my constellations
expose the utopian wish-images in the homestead's scrappy artefacts, all the better. But I've come
to think that such illuminations work in strange ways, and have a persistent habit of dissipating as
soon as they are labelled as such. (I may have my own secret depth charges, but I can't tell you
where they are or they wouldn't go off.)

What I give you here is a tangled navigation through some things and some ideas, an attempt
to imagine interpretation as an ongoing process of re-collection that makes memory (erratically, and
often unintentionally) as it moves among material remains. Each of the objects I describe in this
chapter was once bound up in an active web of social and material relations. These relations
deteriorated with the passage of time; the things became uncoupled from their complex
identifications with other things and with the people who once used them. In a sense, this chapter
is an imaginative reconstruction of those webs of connection and affinity. Although I acknowledge
the impossibility of this task—the constitutive absence that forecloses any claims to recover the
fullness of lived experience—I persist, nonetheless, in my speculative attempt to reanimate these
abandoned materials with some of their former liveliness. It may even be possible to reunite some
of them with their former owners.

Herding the sheep

The room under the claim shack's imploded roof held a deposit of disintegrating
paraphernalia—leather car seats, broken tools, a dismembered treadle sewing machine, a rusty
bedpan. The interior walls of the other room, for the most part intact, shed layers of newspaper and
rough wrapping paper. The news from spring 1909 (as covered by the Rocky Mountain Husbandman
and the Spokane Spokesman Review) poked through the rents. Headlines inked alarm across the walls:

3 Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in One Way Street and Other Writings (London: Verso, 1997 (1929)).
‘Wife Slays Cattle King’, ‘Bold Thug Robs Jap Sectionman’, ‘Monster Women’s Suffrage Petition’, ‘Fear Lynching in Missouri’. Advertisements for whisky, seeds, ploughs, artificial teeth, gopher poison and cheap homesteading land filled in the gaps. On the wall just to the right of the entrance, square nails tacked a sheet of buckled cardboard to the wall. Faint script was just visible on the stained surface:

Ione Randolph, 1 o’clock pm, July 23, 1933, 6 ½ y. old, Height 4 ft 5/8 in, 50 # even

Two other sets of weights and measurements followed—for three year-old Norma and five year-old Irene. At one o’clock, on a hot July afternoon in the midst of the drought, William set each of his granddaughters on the produce scale (where he may have been weighing potatoes, or fruit, to be loaded for delivery) and meticulously recorded their bodily particulars in a documentary impulse.

Almost seventy years later, Ione Randolph King visited the ranch where she had lived intermittently as a child, when her father brought his wife Bonnie and their small daughters to stay with his parents while he looked for work. Ione didn’t recall the July afternoon when her grandfather placed her on the scale, but she had other stories to tell.

Uncle Bill did not like the sheep. That was my dad’s idea, he said... [He thought] they were dumb and messy, and— I loved them. I thought they were wonderful. And I was always out with the sheep and my mother would say, ‘Stay away from those sheep. You’re gonna get ticks’. And sure enough I had ticks in my hair and they had to put turpentine or something on it to back ’em out. Well, I have to tell you story about those sheep. They eventually, they rented some property down at, out of Arlee. It was called the Cherry place, the Cherrys owned a place down, um, in that area, and I don’t remember—I guess they rented property from them, part of their property, and there was an old cabin on it that we would stay in down there, and, so we would go down there part of the summer, when they would feed
off everything here they'd take the sheep down there to feed. And then they decided to get rid of them. They were going to sell them. Well when they came to purchase those sheep, there was only my grandmother and my mother, and myself, or—us girls were there. And I think Shirley An was just a tiny baby at that time.... Anyway, they come with their big truck to take the sheep away. Well, the sheep are all out in the woods. And they didn't know where to go to get them. And so my mother and grandmother were in no shape to go get them and they wanted me to get them. Well, I was not going to go get those sheep. They weren't going to take my sheep away! And you know what, they finally bribed me with a stick of gum... Well, you know gum was pretty scarce for kids at that time. You didn't see much gum. It wasn't like gum today, or, you know, all the goodies. You didn't see that kind of stuff. We didn't have money even to purchase that kind of stuff. I mean, you purchase it for the necessities not for the luxuries. And gum was a luxury, believe me. Anyway, and I'll never forget when they finally got them in that truck and went down the road and by that time that gum didn't taste good at all anymore. And I had given my sheep away for a stick of gum.4

Carpenters dismantled the Moon's shack in early spring 2003. The structure had been built quickly, with little attention to framing, and the walls came away easily. They found an 1892 Missoulian newspaper (with R. F. Moon's address label still attached) pasted to the deepest layer of rough boards. When the walls lay splayed on the damp ground, the workers made a pile of salvaged material to go under the junk tree: rust-red paint cans; wooden handles without tool heads and tool heads without handles; loose springs; petrified shoes and gloves; frayed lengths of rope; cogs, gears, gaskets; patched-over inner tubes; horseshoes. They set aside a stash of smaller material for me to look at when I returned. A couple of months later, I sorted through the boxes to find a spoon, a broken cup, two 1930s labour union badges. At the bottom of the box lay a

4 Ione Randolph King shared her stories with me and with others over the course of several years. One recorded interview (conducted by Bob Oaks, Jo Bernofsky and Sarah DeSilvey on 21 August 2001) provides the majority of the material excerpted in this chapter. The rest of the material is drawn from my notes on unrecorded conversations and from email correspondence between lone and myself in 2002 and 2003.
few irregular pieces of glass, with scraps of paper fused to their surface by years of damp. Rearranging the pieces, I recognised an image: a small sheep, in a patch of light under a tree.

Ione’s spectral sheep appeared elsewhere in the accidental archive. A woman’s leather handbag lay on the floor of the Randolph’s farmhouse, in a drift of shoes, clothes, and magazines. In a pocket next to a gap-toothed comb, I found a folded sheet of paper with an account of one season’s sheep production, including the sale of ‘first wool’, spring lambs, and ‘second wool’ balanced against the cost of hay and other expenses. The other contents of the handbag spun out in different directions. A grocery list, home beauty formulas, a packet of dusty orange turmeric bound up with a pickle recipe, a newspaper clipping. I found the sheep again in a mildewed bundle of papers in the root cellar. Amidst loose sales records, a promotional letter from a patent lawyer, a shipping tag tracking an item from Anchorage, Alaska to Seattle, Washington, and a sketchy map of a placer mine on the Big Horn River, I found a receipt notebook. On a page in the middle of the notebook someone had recorded details from a few days in 1935. The bottom entry read: ‘October 9, 1935. Wm 4 o’clock went to reservation. Oct 13 Wm and Emma came up and returned lower ranch’.

Holding the grimy notebook, I thought of the cabin on the reservation where the family stayed when the sheep were grazing. Then I thought about the image I found slipped between the pages of another musty book, a colour-tinted photo of a group of Native Americans posed in front of a few tepees and a bare sloping hill. The caption read, ‘Missoula, Mont.—“A Band of
Flathead”—Flathead Indian Reservation'. This is strange, since the Flathead Reservation isn’t near Missoula at all, but thirty miles north. The government shifted the Salish and Flathead tribes out of the Missoula Valley in the mid-nineteenth century with a lopsided treaty. Soldiers from Fort Missoula supervised the final removal of local tribes in 1894, the year Ray Moon ‘proved up’ on his claim. By then, the ‘Trail to the Buffalo’ on the hillside just above the homestead gully had fallen into disuse. Last summer, a herd of sheep grazed these hills for the first time in seventy years, enlisted by the City to consume the invasive ‘non-native’ weeds that have taken over the hillside.

Before the carpenters dismantled the shack, I pried the crates off the wall near William’s note, where they had been used as shelves to hold odds and ends. One of the crates split as I tugged the nails out of the brittle wood, but on the inner face, where the crate had set against the wall, an old label still clung to the slats. ‘Mohawk Brand, Grown and Packaged by the Santiago Orange Growers Association, Orange Co., California’ read the text, underneath an image of a young Indian man in a blue loincloth, his bow drawn back taut, the backdrop a rising (or setting?) red sun and a few ragged conifers. Where his head should have been, there was only an absence, a torn hole.

Finding a path

Off the story goes, bouncing around from Ione’s sheep to the torn sheep image, tracking through a few stray notes to a faded photo, then back to the hillside and the place where we started—the side of a derelict shack, where lies a hidden figure, about to release his arrow. Along the way the story works an erratic remembrance of stolen sovereignty, grazing livestock, daily record keeping, migration and stasis. Tentative affinities emerge out of a layering of temporalities and scales—but only the movement keeps the story alive.

Ione’s story appears in the midst of these materials as an apparent rupture. A voice breaks in among the mute things and gives witness to the small dramas of a Montana summer, a herd of sheep, a stick of gum. Ione, now in her seventies, lives in California and has for most of her adult life. She returns to Montana every summer to spend time with her family. Recently, these annual pilgrimages have included visits to the homestead (which she calls ‘the ranch’). On those visits, my sister and I walked around the property with Ione and showed her how things had changed since
she’d last been there. Ione often reminisced about her childhood during these walks, telling stories triggered by familiar structures and objects, or veering off to talk about people and features no longer present. She presented these stories in a discontinuous fashion, often losing the thread of her recollection in another memory or a distracting detail. The story of the sheep is the longest tale she narrated. In this chapter, Ione’s recollections appear interspersed with the collections of objects and documents. Although it may seem like the kind of knowledge she presents is not at all like the knowledge offered by the things, I want to suggest that there are commonalities in these materials of memory.

Ione’s stories were offered to us, and are presented here, detached from the fullness of her life story. They are fragments of recollection, pulled from a density of experience that is ultimately inexpressible. The objects are also detached from their full biographies, presented in their partial and incomplete state. An analogous relation emerges between the practices of collection (my narration of the objects) and recollection (Ione’s narration of these pieces of her life). Oral histories work elaborate condensations and displacements to take a plausible form, to fit a recognisable pattern.5 ‘The disparate, messy fragments of daily experience’, writes Janet Hoskins, come together in the assembly of a coherent self for presentation to the world.6 Remembering in this way is not about extracting ‘a file from a store’, but ‘about connecting, assembling, a bringing together of things in relation to one another’, and in relation to a listener.7 The act of connection and assembly works by a logic not of sequential reconstruction, but of association. Ione’s story moves from the sheep in the orchard, the ticks in her hair, to the incident at the cabin—each memory linked to the other, but not indelibly. Cognitive psychologists describe the process of recollection as a movement along associative pathways, tracking fluidly from object to object, branching off in response to internal and external prompts.8

The erratic rhythms of recollection can be detected in my attempts to draw the material remains into resonant constellations of memory. Associative pathways link these physical fragments into plausible groupings, and a speculative narration emerges from these alignments, a might-have-

---

been that refuses closure and yet makes visible otherwise illegible scraps of text, fabric, metal, bone. Ione's presence in his chapter compresses the distance and brings the telling into a lived present through an interplay of oral and material histories. Her memories work as points in the constellation, shards of information that help me draw out memories from the other things. There is no single path through these traces, but any chosen path illuminates different pieces of the puzzle.

The animal you describe

One of the root cellar crates contained a mass of gritty papers: rough bundles bound with lengths of string, eroded by damp and rodent nibbling. When I found this inauspicious collection I tipped the lot into a cardboard box for later sorting. On a May day when I was feeling particularly resilient, I spread the papers under the black locust tree on a brown bedsold and began to separate them into piles. One bit of thin brown paper had 'April 13, 1933' written across the top. I recognised William's scrawl on the purple-inked sheet. It was pasted to another sheet, inscribed with daily records of expenses: coffee, potatoes, chewing tobacco, flour, corn meal, bacon, brown sugar, gas, baking soda. On April 17, the list told me, William spent $3.98, on gas and oil, meat, chewing tobacco, laundry soap, and 'P.F'. That evening he gave Emma six dollars for seed. The list ended abruptly on May 5th. In the remaining mass of loose documents (most of them farm and business records from the 1930s) I found a matching sheet, and then another. A faint residue on the edges marked where the pieces had once been glued together. When I'd located all the missing sections and put them edge to edge, the whole thing stretched out taller than my own height,

almost six feet of anxious accounting. The record continued on the backside of the paper with purchases of wheat, oats, a plow shear, bottle brushes. It ended with May 31, 1933. Total spent in month May, 1933: $186.00. I fastened the sections together with tiny clothespins and hung the list in the black locust tree next to Bill's old house. The paper bellied out slightly in the breeze.

The list offered a fragile document of daily compromise and consumption; the frequent gas and oil purchases, the left front truck tire William bought on April 18. Presumably these purchases weren't for the horses? Why did William buy eighty cents worth of butter the next day? Is it possible that all the cows were dry at the same time? Or had they sold their whole supply to customers that week? The list clashed with the image of a self-contained horse-powered farm I'd adopted. I wasn't sure what to make of the delivery route powered by an engine with an oil leak.

Not only did they sell things from here. Grandad would go down to the, um, oh down by the railroad there... to the wholesale [warehouses] and he would pick up things from there as well, and take it around on his little casaba wagon. And sell, from there as well as what was from here, the eggs and the milk and then of course any produce off the trees, that was available at that time. Of course, they produced a lot better than they do now, of course, they were better taken care of... Sometimes they even had people come in and help with [the harvest]. I remember being up in the cherry tree picking cherries...

Inside the handbag where I found the accounting of sheep expenses, I found a bit of folded newspaper with an item reprinted from a column in the Sheridan (Wyoming) Press. The clipping recorded a joke about President Roosevelt's New Deal agricultural recovery scheme, introduced in the spring of 1933. The government planned to raise prices by killing off surplus hogs and other livestock, compensating farmers for the loss. A young appraiser from the city is sent out with a little
book of instructions describing the various classes of livestock and telling him how to value each animal according to age, condition, and breed. The first animal he sees is a goat, and he isn’t able to find it described in his book. The appraiser immediately wires his superiors in Washington as follows:

‘Have found animal with a forlorn face, a long beard, a skinny body, and a bare rump. What is it and what valuation shall I set upon it?’

A few hours later he receives a reply from his headquarters in the National Capitol:

‘The animal you describe is a farmer and has no value.’

Someone, perhaps Emma, slipped this scrap of subversive humour into the battered handbag.

While FDR pushed through legislation intended to ease the devastating impacts of the Depression on rural America, these farmers evidently remained unconvinced that the policy-makers in Washington appreciated their value. In one bundle, I found a scratch pad scrawled with numbers and notes. On June 11, 1932, a withdrawal of $45 added up to a total of $62.65, owe bank. The accounting trailed down the sheet, the ink fainter at the bottom. June 16, 80.43 Bk owed, overdrawn. On the next page, the total had risen to $83.92. The words, ‘Behind the Times’ were inked in next to the total.

‘cause a lot of the family would come in. It was hard times back in there. And when they had nowhere else to go they came to the ranch. Just like our family did, my dad—during the Depression there was no work available. And, ah, so that’s why we would come back here. And apparently my uncle still in Spokane, apparently, would write there’s work available or something and then we went back and that’s when Norma Jean was born back there and then the work was no longer and he came back here to see if he could find work.

The things record the minutia of money owed, money due. A mildewed letter logged a request for payment, services unspecified. Glossy magazine advertisements recalled products the

---

10 Congress passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act on May 12, 1933. By July an emergency purchase program was in place, with government appraisers sent out to reimburse farmers for stock and crops culled to meet the allotted sale limits.
family couldn’t afford—tractors and refrigerators, washing machines and beauty products. Over

twelve million Americans were out of work in the spring of 1933. Ione’s sister Shirley remembers

that homeless, jobless men also found their way up to the ranch during the Depression. They were

never turned away without a bite to eat, and sometimes they stayed on to help with haying or

mining. Among the root cellar records, I found two check stubs from the State of Montana Relief

Commission, for June and July of 1933—$31.20 and $27.90.

The rubble-choked bins of the cellar turned up countless receipts from Missoula’s wholesale

produce warehouses. The tissuey yellow slips recorded purchases of tomatoes, oranges, celery,

strawberries, lettuce, cantaloupe, bananas, peppers, lemons (most grown in California’s Central

Valley, where Dust Bowl refugees and Mexican immigrants worked the fields for starvation wages).

William’s detailed ledger books document the routes by which these products—and the eggs, milk,

and vegetables from his own farm—found their way into Missoula kitchens. One notebook, no

more than a stained cover holding sheaves of loose papers, documented milk and produce


deliveries William made to households in late 1932 and 1933. The notebook’s lined pages had been supplemented with scrap from elsewhere—torn envelopes, unlined wrapping paper, the backside of a child’s drawing.

William often accepted trade in payment for his household accounts. The ledger books record exchanges for car parts, onions, hide-tanning. The Sage boys—Chauncey and Clarence—helped Will peddle in return for credit on their family’s account. R. F. Wood, an attendant at a service station in downtown Missoula, kept a supply of gas on hand to dole out in lieu of cash. The Warwicks, who lived on Wolf Avenue just north of the tracks, owed William $66.98 by the end of May 1933. In June, they paid an instalment of $26.25 towards their bill—not with cash, but with supplies: a tent ($6.25), paint ($5.00), tin ($5.00), rope ($15.00). In 2003, we pulled a canvas tent out of a twisted shed—the stencilled mark ‘photography’ still legible on the fabric (a surplus army tent?). The cloth tore as we dragged it into the sun. The same shed turned up other inscrutable finds. A buggy seat. Masses of old clothes. A box full of cigar advertisements.

[Grandma’s] tent was just big enough to hold a bed, and a little space around it. A double bed. And I used to sleep, even when we were younger we’d sleep out here in the summer with Grandma, and then we’d come up on the weekend... we would lie there looking at the stars out the flaps of the tent while Grandma pointed out the constellations.

Next to the pocketbook joke about the goat-farmer lay this note, dated April 17, 1933, from a farmer in Stevensville (about thirty miles south of Missoula in the Bitterroot Valley):

Mr. W. H. Randolph, Missoula, Montana

Dear Sir:

In answer to your kind inquiry of the 12th [illeg]: Yes, we have plenty spring rye seed—the price is $1.20 per Cwt. recleaned; or for hard sowing, just as it came from combine, $1.00 per Cwt—quite a few heads. This rye is beardless and beats anything we’ve ever raised before. Good for pasture, hay + grain. Trusting we may receive your order, I am,

Yours,

R.S. McIntyre

Remember the notation in the middle of the long expense list, the six dollars William gave Emma for seed on April 17, 1933? I found a tin of rye seed on a high shelf in the old milk house where Emma used to separate the cream. A colony of weevils had occupied the tin decades ago. Their tough grey bodies mingled with the desiccated husks of the old seed. When I needed a cover crop
for the homestead garden plot, I bought Montana spring rye from the bulk bins at Missoula’s natural food store. I planted it on Friday, April 18, 2003—The stalks came up purple, almost invisible against the dark soil.

You know they would go along and rake up so much hay together, and then would lift the thing up and leave it in a pile and they’d go on and rake some more. And then the, uh, the wagon and the horses—they would pitch it in with pitchforks, into the wagon. We used to have haystacks, right out in here. Over from the chicken coop. And they’d have haystacks and they also put it in the barn. They’d put as much in the barn as they could get... and what they couldn’t get in the barn they would make haystacks out of. I remember Uncle Bill cutting hay up at the Suneson’s there on that flat area between the gate and the house. I was up there walking along with him as the horses pulled the rake.

Something more

What is happening here? Hal Foster, drawing on Benjamin, writes of the power of the outmoded object to ‘spark a brief profane illumination of a past productive mode, social formation, and structure of feeling—an uncanny return of a historically repressed moment of direct manufacture, simple barter, personal use’. 13 This chapter might be understood as tracking these illuminations in torn images, scrappy notes, a handful of seeds—but to what end? Foster would claim,

This is not to romanticise this old economic mode so much as it is to spark a connection between psychic and historical dimensions via a social object—a connection, however private, that might be both critical and curative in the present. 14

As much as I’d like to agree with Foster here, his denial of the romantic impulse in this project fails to convince me. I wonder about my own satisfaction at finding evidence of a hidden economy of barter in the scraps I assemble, my affection for the horse drawn wagon over the oil-greedy truck. The risk, I think, lies in the tendency to approach these objects as talismans of what Johanna Malt identifies as

---

14 Ibid.
an idealised 'time before alienation'. If I am working in this sense, the 'critical and curative' power of my interpretation seems a weak, regressive one.

But I wonder if the things present their own twist on this nostalgic tale, triggering the return of more complicated memories. In the loose collection of objects and records I've offered above, some of the things speak to the 'old economic mode'. But others present elements of a recognisably 'modern' mode of exchange and consumption—the documents of barter set next to the government relief slips; the evidence of both labour-intensive handwork and mass production. There is a sense in which these things (and how I've chosen to arrange them) point not to the unsullied purity of that hardscrabble life, but to the way it was shot through with contradictory modes of survival, uneven accommodations of change. The memory that emerges through these objects is already alienated from the old systems of production and self-provision.

What comes out of even these few things is not sense of some outmoded simplicity, but rather a sense of the complexity of these lives. The tropes used to craft a cultural imaginary for Depression-era America usually draw on a limited range of possible human responses: passive despair, determined resilience, grateful industry, unchecked greed. These responses skim over the particular: the woman who sleeps in a bartered tent to survive the summer heat, the man who uses his grandchild's sketch pad to supplement the paper in his ledger book, the child who clips out an image of 'A Band of Flathead' encamped in the valley where she attends school. In the homestead's waste, I had stumbled across a record that revealed not only the mechanics of everyday survival, but also the awkward assembly of subjectivity out of miscellaneous materials, disparate experience. The homestead's residues—not the official archives—preserved a memory of minor events and everyday decisions in these people's lives. In these fragments, only legible through an oblique process of alignment, I caught a glimpse of what Avery Gordon calls their 'complex personhood'.

'Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society's problems are entangled and weave

16 Several scholars have made the argument that the 1930s represented a watershed moment for the transition from a producer to a consumer economy in the United States, and the introduction of a recognisable 'modernity'. See Barnard; Terry Smith, Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are working towards', writes Gordon.\(^8\) She calls attention to something that seems to be working through the disjointed constellations—the sense in which we make up who we are as we go along, with what we are given and with what we can't quite reach. The illumination, in this instance, is not really about waking up from a capitalist dream state, but about awakening an appreciation for the entanglement of politics and particulars, economics and intimacy, in any form of subjectivity. The awakening comes through the objects, the materials, that people gather around them to use and discard in the course of their lives. At the very least, Gordon suggests, such a critical stance presumes that 'people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning'.\(^9\)

---

**Memoryhouse**

The farmhouse pantry, or ‘cold room’, sets into the hillside on the southwest corner of the house. It is an unpleasant, dark room lined with deep, sagging shelves and littered with rubbish. In

---


\(^9\) Ibid., 5.
the summer of 2002 a friend and I donned respirator masks and gloves and set out to clear the room. We worked through a rank, crumbling, mass of material—cans encrusted with the residue of leaking contents; glass jars full of swollen, festering seeds; broken cups and plates; unidentifiable substances; drifts of dust and insulation material; dead mice in the bottom of a hand-crank dough kneader. Cobwebs laced the corners of the room and the low rafters. We stirred up a foul stale smell that seemed to linger around us for days.

In the farmhouse kitchen, the cookstove—a ‘Home Comfort’ model—holds part of the wall against the slumping hillside. Soil drifts down onto the burners and the pots and pans from a hole in the wall created by a badger or other shelter-seeking animal. A child’s crayon drawing turned up in one of the 1930s root cellar bundles. It depicts a cross-section of a kitchen, the floor at the level of the paper’s bottom edge, the roof peak at the top. A woman stands at a stove, her hand on the oven door. A stovepipe disappears through the ceiling and lets a ribbon of smoke out into a blue sky. A small child sits at a table, apparently waiting. Two curtained windows from either side of the image. At the top of the picture, just under the peak of the roof, a source of light emits thick yellow rays. The light appears to be either lamp or sun, or some hybrid of both. Ione’s name is pencilled on the back of the sheet.
In the evenings, here, in the summertime, of course, the days were longer, and we could play out around... but in winter, when there was snow, you couldn't be outside. We were inside around the lamp. We'd do some reading. It seems like we had some games we played, and things like that... We did have a radio.... We all ate together... the kitchen table set over in this corner next to that outside door... we got quite a few people around that table...My Mom did an awful lot of the work up here. And it was just awful hard on my mom. You know, trying to wash, for family, and I can remember scrubbing Shirley An's diapers when I was eight years old on a scrub board in a tub. But they eventually got an old Maytag washer that sat outside that back door that was run by gas, and that's where Mom did the laundry.

A collection of National Geographic magazines filled a set of makeshift cranberry-crate bookshelves next to the kitchen cupboard. Rodents had chewed along many of the spines to get at the glue, but the magazines—mostly from the 1920s through the 1940s—were still, for the most part, legible. When I went to move the magazines I disturbed a cache of seeds and bedding. The contents of the magazines called to mind an era of voyeuristic cultural imperialism, and archived the ephemera of a local everyday. Between the articles about Afghanistan and the Orient, aerial photography and windmills, I found letters, pressed leaves and flowers, clipped advertisements. In the November 1933 issue I found a grocery list reminding someone to buy bread, syrup, coffee, rice, hamburger, cabbage, cereal, yeast cakes, lard. Another page disclosed a found collage: a cellophane chewing tobacco wrapper scrolled the words 'Sparkplug, Sparkplug, Sparkplug' over a photo of women collecting peat in the Scottish Highlands—peasant self-provisioning overlaid with a scrap of mass-produced packaging.20

20 Sparkplug was a popular brand of chewing tobacco.
Emma’s black handbag (which must seem bottomless) also held a paper scrap rubbed soft as cotton with age. The newspaper clipping details a ‘Recipe for Gray Hair’, which instructs the reader to combine water, Bay Rum, a ‘small box of Barbo compound’, and ¼ ounce of glycerine to create a low cost mixture that will ‘gradually darken streaked, faded or gray hair’. Next to this, a smaller clipping describes the recipe for a cucumber and lemon lotion to be used as ‘whitener for the hands and neck’. A third scrap of lined paper carries a transcription of these recipes, in Emma’s pencilled script. I imagined Emma peering at her reflection in one of the farmhouse’s cloudy mirrors. Above the kitchen sink, I found an irregular mirror fragment bound with string to a rough backing of cardboard. Another mirror hung in the middle room against a flaking whitewashed wall.

They would fill stalls in there a couple times, milking. They would haul the milk down... My Grandad and my uncle and then my Great Uncle Bob, was here, who was my grandmother’s brother, he was here once in a while. Whoever was around did the milking, and Grandma milked and Grandma would haul all those pails of milk down, two big heavy pails of milk... down that hill. And that’s what crippled her up so badly.... she worked hard and wore her body out, and got phlebitis in her leg and it got ulcerated.

Emma’s condition eventually deteriorated to the point that she had to use crutches to move around (I found a pair in a closet in Bill, Jr.’s house). The kitchen junk drawer—which I inventoried earlier on—held a sad half-dozen worn rubber grips designed to fit on the bottom of the crutches. One day the root cellar turned up a small metal-backed notebook, encrusted with a chalky corrosion. One of the pages fused to the notebook clip showed a hand-written recipe for ‘D. Pratt’s Favorite Liniment’, an ointment that Emma may have applied to soothe her sore leg. Ingredients included oil of cedar, oil of spike, organum, and turpentine. Emma has written the date, April 24, 1934, at the bottom of the sheet. The recipe appears on the flip side of a flyer for the Seventh Day...
Adventist Church. ‘The Meaning of World Conditions. As Revealed in Striking Bible Prophecies. Why the Unrest Among Nations, the Increase of Crime and Lawlessness, and the Conflict Between Capital and Labour? What Will the Final Outcome Be?’ The flyer promises, ‘The Truth Clearly and Fearlessly Presented’, on Sunday night at eight o’clock, with good singing and special music. Emma didn’t manage to convert her husband to her chosen faith, but her granddaughters hold that, in accordance with Adventist dietary codes, she refused to allow alcohol on the ranch.

That being so, I don’t know who consumed the beer and whiskey that filled the bottles I find scattered around. I also find rusty bottle openers on high shelves, in cans of nuts and bolts. A cousin (whose stories have been discredited by the immediate family) insists that William made corn alcohol in a still in the attic and peddled it on the streets during Prohibition, the bottles hidden under the carrot tops. She also remembers family stories about William sneaking down to sit around the campfire with the Indians who camped in the gully. The truth remains buried, covered over like the site of the old Highlander brewery at the base the North Hills. A label from a corked bottle shows the view of the Bitterroot Valley visible from the highest point on the Randolphs’ property.
William’s restless energies often took him away from the farm, on errands to uphold imaginary or genuine commitments. The sheaves of tattered paper I’ve recovered from the root cellar tell me he managed a timber stand on the Idaho border, sent off invention sketches to Washington patent offices, fancied himself a real estate broker but held a substantial mortgage on his own property.

When we were here too, before that was fixed up for us up there, I remember us girls had a bed here, in the corner. And we would three of us sleep in this bed... So then this was a cover to the old bathtub that sat in this corner, and we sometimes used that but we’d have to haul the water all the way from in there, into the tub. But we used that as a top to play on and we had our paper dolls and things like that... And Grandad also, after we were up there this bed was taken out, of course, and he had a lot of his stuff in this corner from his peddling days, you know, in the casaba wagon. And his butterfly collection that he had in here. I remember being in here with him doing butterflies and pressing flowers... Grandad collected wherever he went... After Grandad died, Uncle Bill said... ‘I used to think that Grandad never did anything, but he did more than I thought he did’... He was gone a lot with all his inventions...

The back room of the farmhouse holds reminders: boxes of crumbling rocks and fossils; a few disintegrating moths and butterflies mounted on a cardboard backing; labelled jars of sand and soil. When I first entered the room I found a shoe-repair station balanced on top of a battered trunk (the one which held the 1894 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

The found documents tell me William began mining for gold up Nine Mile Creek in 1935. He bought part ownership in a set of claims he called the ‘Butte Placer’, in an area that, according to a letter from a possible partner, had already been sampled by the Guggenheims ‘many years ago’. During days stolen away from the farm, William dug pits, set up sluices, and panned the sandy deposits for gold. Although the claim yielded little, William kept searching. One day, the root cellar turned up a small notebook of rough brown paper. The writing on the first page is illegible, but the next page shows a crude sketch of what appear to be land section boundaries, and a creek. The words ‘Nine Mile’ run across the bottom in William’s hand. A few pages in, a drawing fills the page, in neat perspective. Above the sketch William has written, ‘Black Sand Catcher and Saver Fine Gold, Use Your Emagination [sic]’.
Remembering with

The stories I assemble work through different kinds of materiality. I refer to sheaves of paper, notebooks, records, calculations. These resources are deliberate textual inscriptions, mnemonic markers. The Randolph’s scattered note-taking generated hundreds of items. Each document in their annals of the everyday indexed an unrepeatable moment. As I worked, the undertow of minute detail that flowed through these documents sometimes threatened to drown out other, less articulate, recollections. A different kind of materiality governed the can of rye seed, the worn crutch grips, and the buckets. Traces of labour and use could seem to animate these materials, to propose an empathetic connection with the people who made and handled them. A cache of rusty bent nails recalled the tedious job of salvage. An unfinished basket of mending hinted at the too-short days, the mounting work. These things evoked what Kathleen Stewart calls the ‘fragmented, situated stories of people getting around and making do’. 21

In trying to call forth these situated stories, I ‘take up the proposals’ offered by the things. 22 I’ve mentioned how some of these objects only become legible when placed in relation to other, perhaps more immediately intelligible, objects. But the bringing into legibility requires a process of manipulation, description, displacement. The sense to be made of these things emerges in relation to the documents, but also in relation to my own imagination, to my academic aims, and to my haptic experience of textures and forms. There is a rift here—a gap between my desire to recover a trace of the past and the undeniable inaccessibility of that past. The objects are ‘saturated with meaning that will never be fully revealed’, and as such they present ‘both a

---

surplus and a lack of significance'. Confronting these objects—especially those that offer no inscription to guide interpretation—I also confront my own confusion about how far to allow my intervention to play out, how much license to give my imagination in this memory-making game.

I watched other people play with the homestead's materiality in similar ways, confronting absence with their own weight of experience and desire. Navigations through the place sparked a cascade of recollections about other places and other things. Encounters with stray objects and precise locations recalled the smell of the barn at a grandmother's farm, a childhood game, a long-forgotten orchard. One young woman knelt to scan the scabby wall of 1909 newspapers for news items on labour unrest and Wobbly politics, looking for a history that would validate and revitalise her own political commitments. On another day, two herbalists bent over a book to study the ingredients for home remedies, herbal potions, vermifuges, tinctures and salves. These were intellectual and political appropriations, people seeking a reflection in the place that would resonate with their own identities. In these moments, the place obliged by offering up scraps of evidence, loose strands of understanding. In other moments, the place resisted these appropriations by

---


presenting things no one wanted to claim. A battered box, once a dispenser of graham crackers, was found in the attic of the old farmhouse. 'Pacific Coast Biscuit Company', reads the red, lozenge shaped label: a white swastika sits between the words 'trade', and 'mark'. The box made people uncomfortable, unsure of how to approach a record that spoke to a deeply ambivalent historical moment, the symbol unreadable except in the context of its later exploitation (which may have already begun when the crackers went into the box).

Stitch in time

_The dress my father made for me... it was black velvet with long sleeves and a white collar, as I remember. He made it from a ladies’ dress he had taken apart and cut my dress from, and I don’t remember if he had a pattern or just cut it down from the adult size dress. I’m not sure if he learned to sew from my grandmother, but he was quite talented... he made several quilts from old wool coats and suits during the winter when there was not much outside work to be done on the ranch._

The old quilting frame still leans against the corner of a storage room, inches marked along the hinged wooden sections. The artefacts of mending and making do litter the homestead’s boxes and shelves. I find rusty needles jabbed through sections of rough, stained fabric, or tossed into cigar boxes with collections of nuts and bolts. The thimble from the 1924 Presidential campaign ('Coolidge and Dawes') shared a drawer with a six-inch long darning needle and its knob. Many of the garments crafted, or mended, with these tools still reside at the homestead. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, The barrel where I found William’s obituary and funeral flowers contained packed layers of worn housedresses, flour-sack tea towels and moth-pocked shirts. One threadbare blue housedress was mended in the lap with a section of white cotton, on which the word ‘Sugar’ was still legible. I imagined the memories collected in the weave of this ordinary garment: the feel of working hands at rest, the cool pods of peas, children’s restless bodies.

In other boxes I found rank wool coats in pre-war fashions, wool caps with disintegrating stitching, Sunday dresses, holey blankets, perhaps a dozen pairs of identical work overalls all worn through at the knee. One skirt had been pieced together out of a man’s cotton shirt. The lines of the original garment were still visible in the rounded armholes and the long sleeve sections. The skirt recalled the shirt it once was, the strain of the back it covered, the hands that pulled apart the seams and reshaped it, the heat radiating from the nearness of a wood cookstove, the mice that
stole patches of fibre for their nests. A copy of the Missoulian from 22 March 1933, discovered on the littered farmhouse floor, carried a classified ad: Your Cast-off Clothing is Worth Money to Someone, ‘If you have dresses of which you have become tired of seeing hanging in your closet, why not turn them into cash through the Classified Ads’.

Magazines—Farmer’s Wife, Country Home, The Saturday Evening Post—lay in slick drifts on the dusty floor of the Randolphs’ farmhouse when I first started to work in there. Most of them ran from the 1920s up to the end of World War II, when Emma and William vacated the three-room dwelling for the outbuilding-turned-ranchhouse less than a hundred yards away. If the mailing labels are anything to go by, Emma’s sisters Maud and Ruth held the subscriptions in their names and passed discarded copies on to their sister. I stowed the magazines away in a cardboard archive box, and would occasionally pull them out to browse through. One day I came across a letter on the editorial page of the September 1935 Farmer’s Wife from, from a self-described ‘farm woman in Iowa’: ‘If I were the editor of a magazine like The Farmer’s Wife’ she wrote, ‘I would let hardly an issue go by without telling young farm wives not to lose their femininity. That is one of their dearest possessions and neither time nor the circumstance of living should be allowed to rob them
of it. The letter writer recommends the daily application of powder, rouge, and lipstick, as well as the guilt-free purchase of silk underwear. "These stand for something vital in every woman's life", she concludes. The editor responds, "Well, the Farmer's Wife does present that idea in every issue, both in its advertising columns and in its editorial content". One of my favourite finds from the stack of magazines and catalogues is a serendipitous collage in the 1944 Lane Bryant 'Style Book of Slenderizing Fashions': two matronly women model smart polka dot dress-sets on page 10. On the facing page, a grizzly bear swipes at a fish, an image clipped from elsewhere and slipped into this unlikely pairing.

Very rarely would I find an item of clothing that had not been mended in at least one place. Most were held together with several patches, or patches upon patches. Even plentiful resources such as burlap sacks—which once contained potatoes, or cornmeal, or rutabagas—had been mended again and again, holes stitched up with puckered string nodes. The string saved for these repairs lay scattered about the place in drawers and boxes. The kitchen junk drawer contained perhaps two dozen balls of different sizes, each remembering the neat crimp of flour sacks, the
sharp tug of release and the tight winding motion of capture. I was drawn to the inarticulate materiality of these wound balls. Held in the hand, they seemed both light and dense at once, each one unique in fibre, texture, size. Their tactility sparked a vicarious involuntary memory of the countless tiny tasks that make up to the effort to survive, to stay clothed, warm, dry. I wanted to unwind and rewind them, to learn through touch the repetitive, precise motion that had crafted these ordinary orbs.

An ending

In this chapter, I've been drawing out two distinct, but interlocking, points about the kind of remembering evoked by methods that work favour juxtaposition and borderline disarray. One point has drawn out the way constellations of loosely associated fragments can disclose memory where none was formerly evident, to make present previously absent objects. The other point has concerned the workings of subjectivity, and the kinds of sideways insights that can be gleaned when scrappy evidence speaks both to intimate knowledge and to broader social patterns. I've been concerned to draw out the equivocation and discontinuity sedimented in the material residues, but I've also acknowledged my own labour in arranging and calling attention to these things. The memories that emerge from this experiment have an erratic, uncertain quality—though a coherent message sometimes bleeds through.

The glimpse of 1930s Montana farm life that comes into view through this story-telling is dense with the details of a few particular lives, a series of choices, disappointments, and daily tasks. It seems slightly unfamiliar to me, weighted with a shifty politics, too amorphous to name. 'It's not just humans that have memory,' suggests Kevin Hetherington, 'things too can tell us something about their past...that we cannot find in our representations of that past'. And because we do not have the ready-made frames to fit them in, these memories can be difficult to express. The insights Michael Shanks and Mike Pearson offer about their work on abandoned 19th century Welsh farms could apply equally to the homestead:

> These places are saturated with meaning: whilst little of physical worth is at risk here, everything of cultural value is at stake...They require a 'rescue archaeology' not of physical remains but of cultural identity. For any approach to them must take into account the

---

endless narratives, the political aspirations and disappointments, which have accumulated around them.26

Yes, some of this comes through. The endless narratives that spin around the negotiation of government influence and ingrained independence, around desired and lived versions of femininity and masculinity, around intimacy and distance. Ione's recollections deepen these narratives, offer a facet of experience that somehow animates the objects without overwhelming them. Her voice appears as supplement, rather than structuring sequence. The whole process—her recollections, the written recollections I put down—weaves through the things, picking them up, putting them down, working a puzzling pattern. Somehow, the stories recover insights that might not allow themselves to appear through more direct methods. This is an open process of interpretation, which works, as Gorden has suggested, 'a different kind of materialism where a great deal of what can be known is tied to the search for knowing it'.27 The process operates on a principle of suggestion and inference—the 'might have been' that can never be proven one way or the other. Cultural remembering, as it is practiced in this chapter, involves a sustained engagement with associative and idiosyncratic modes of recollection.

26 Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, Theatre/Archaeology (London: Routledge, 2001), 156.
27 Gordon, 69.
This engagement may lead to a subtle entangling of researcher and researched, as the work of memory destabilises coherent notions of self and other. Andrea Fisher, in her discussion of a series of overlooked Farm Security Administration photos, taken by women photographers in the late 1930 and early 40s, makes an observation that picks up on this dislocation. ‘Across our encounters with the remains of different moments, we locate ourselves as the dispersion of many selves’, she writes. ‘Their past becomes legible only in terms of our own incoherence’. She continues, talking about the photos (though this observation could be applied to the homestead’s documents and artefacts as well), ‘In the moment of their production, too, the stability of identity wavered’. Incoherence, in this sense, does not have to signal in comprehension, but may instead open a working space which respects the complexity of the historical subjects I study and acknowledges the way my own (often uncertain) aims mediate the stories I am able to tell. We are all wavering, drawing in objects and images to peg down the corners of the flapping tent.

Recently, while flipping through some old notes, I found something I’d written about a conversation with a friend that took place soon after I started to visit the homestead. He had commented on the innocence he saw represented in the place, in its simple structures and tools. I was trying to explain to him why I didn’t see it that way. I mentioned William’s tattered butterfly collection, the Zane Grey novel I found on the farmhouse floor, the clippings I found pasted to walls and slipped between book pages, the cowboy costume box. I told him no, it wasn’t about innocence, or not that I could see. It was about finding things that make the world ‘more’, I wrote later. ‘Things’, the journal continues, ‘that shatter patterns of long days and steady work... It’s the riddle of it—how we code our worlds with edgy symbols and systems of relevance. There is no age of unselfconscious symmetry for us to look back to. We’re holding the frayed end of a long line of uncertainty and articulate myth’. Maybe this chapter is about trying to solve that riddle, again.

A walker who approaches the homestead from the east along the open ridgeline path encounters a strange artefact of the Randolphs' industry. An irregular silhouette against the swell of the hill, visible from a fair distance, turns out to be a linear installation of rusted car chassis, axles, springs, and miscellaneous steel parts. The occasional railroad sleeper post punctuates this chain of outmoded transport. Sections of barbed wire double and twine around each other to bind the unlikely posts into an unconvincing barrier. This makeshift fence marks the eastern edge of the former Randolph property.

Once past the car-part boundary, the path curves north over bare hills, toward a forested mountain range. The way seems to stop abruptly at a barbed wire fence, until you notice a rough track switchbacking west, down into a gentle swale. The track leads into the homestead’s gully past the orchard, where a few skeletal machine carcasses lie in the tall grass. A young cherry tree grows up through one rusty steel frame, which sits on a set of disintegrating wheels. I inspected this relic with an older visitor to the homestead last summer. He was curious about the vehicle because it seemed to be some sort of hybrid—a horse-drawn wagon constructed on a truck frame. He noted the ‘Ford’ emblem and the ‘Made in the USA’ stamp on the hubs of the wooden-spoked wheels. ‘Probably a Model T truck’, he deduced. Later, he reflected, ‘There was no throwaway society like today. They just used things until they broke, and then they braced them and kept using them until they didn't work anymore, and then dragged them under the tree’. The Moon shack has a small bright steel plate attached next to the exterior door. The plate reads, ‘Ford’, in elegant script, over the name of H.O. Bell, a former Ford dealer in downtown Missoula.
Henry Ford began manufacturing the Model T in 1908. By 1927, when he discontinued the line to develop the replacement Model A, he had produced 15 million cars in his Dearborn, Michigan factory. In the same year an American public opinion poll voted Ford the third greatest man in history, after Napoleon Bonaparte and Jesus Christ. Ford’s quasi-mythical status stemmed from his self-proclaimed role as capitalist prophet, and his affordable automobiles played no small part in greasing the American transition from a producer to a consumer society. His autobiography, *My Life and Work*, was a bestseller in Germany in 1923, where many were eager to adopt his technological rationalism as an antidote to post-war depression.

Among the homestead’s scattered deposits of printed material, I found a copy of the 1926 ‘Ford Pictorial’, an illustrated flyer celebrating the durability and utility of the Ford models. On the cover, a sturdy Ford has transported a group of site-seers to the Daniel Boone National Monument in Louisville, Kentucky. The flyer includes a photo-documentary of Ford vehicles on tour across the United States, from the New Jersey Palisades to the Seattle Yacht Club, the Smithsonian to Sequoia National Park (where a proud Ford owner has driven his car onto the massive trunk of the fallen ‘Auto Log’). Henry Ford’s ethos is summarised on the back cover: ‘Materials, Workmanship,
In 1929, the stock market crashed. Initially, Ford’s industrial empire seemed invulnerable. Then, when sales of the Model A dropped by over half in 1931, Ford closed operations for a few months. When he reopened in December, he had instituted a ‘speedup’ of the assembly line. Workers were expected to put in 10 hours a day, five days a week, for $4 pay—1914 wages. Ford operated on the theory that greater efficiency in production would make up for declining sales, and might even boost profits if he could lower the purchase price. Meanwhile, President Hoover urged people to spend as their patriotic duty, to pull the country out of its slump. Insufficient consumption, not overproduction, was seen to be enemy of prosperity. Ford’s workers were not convinced. On March 7, 1932, 3,000 men and women marched on the River Rouge plant in Dearborn, demanding seven hour days, abolition of Ford’s invasive ‘spy’ system, the right to organise, and a reduction of production speeds. Dearborn police opened fire on the marchers during a scuffle and four people were killed.

The Randolphs appropriated the materials wasted by Ford’s overproduction to prop up Ray

---

4 Watkins, 129.
Moon's sagging fencelines, and to rework cannibalistically into their own alternative automotive models. In one of the root cellar bundles I found an application for a motor vehicle title, dated June 15, 1933. The application, under the name of William Randolph, notes the make of the ½ ton truck as a Ford Model T, but when asked 'Is the motor vehicle specially constructed or reconstructed?', William has answered: 'truck rebuilt from touring car remains together with other parts secured elsewhere'. The words 'No Good' scrawl across the document in red pencil. When the state rejected William's title application, maybe he parked the old truck in the orchard and gradually stripped it of useful parts until only the axles and chassis remained to shelter the young cherry tree. Or maybe this one joined the other disassembled Fords in the pasture fence. Subsistence bricolage undercut corporate capital; an icon of American progress decelerated and finally ground to a halt on a wind-blasted ridge. 5

The drive of the 'production economy' carries on at the base of Randolph Hill in the twenty-first century. Descendents of Ford's Model T, reborn in the form of the SUV, zip by at speeds unknown to their rattletrap ancestors. Inside the Moon's collapsing shack, I found a card printed with the calculations for 'Speed Translated into Stopping Distances'. The card lists the maximum possible speed as forty miles per hour. In 1937, while living in exile in Paris, Walter Benjamin wrote an essay on collector and historian Edward Fuchs which includes this passage:

[T]raffic speeds, like the capacity to duplicate both the spoken and the written word, have outstripped human needs. The energies that technology develops beyond their threshold are destructive. They serve primarily to foster the technology of warfare, and of the means used to prepare public opinion for war. 6

---

CHAPTER FOUR
Making use of things

The porch

The Randolphs constructed a rudimentary creamery shed (or ‘milchhouse’) in 1923, a few hundred yards down-slope from the barn where they milked their small herd of dairy cows. New public health codes required farmers to carry out cream separation and processing in buildings with proper sanitation and cooling facilities. Though the Randolphs’ new shed followed the letter of the law, they introduced some innovations in their choice of materials. The foundation they built up with a mixture of Portland cement and gravel scraped from the hill above the farm. Discarded boxcar panels, scavenged from the railroad dump next to the Missoula switching yard, formed the four walls. Two spare windows and a makeshift screen door opened onto the north face. They covered the inside walls with irregular pieces of corrugated tin and coated the whole interior (including a small tin box screwed into the wall as a tiny cupboard) with a layer of pale green paint. Uneven lengths of wood from the farm’s scrap pile provided the deck for a cobbled-together porch, whose footings were made of loose lumber ends and a toothy gearbox from a piece of unneeded machinery. When they completed their final task—pouring a slab out to join the building to the nearby well—twenty-one year old Keith carved his initials and ‘May 1923’ in the wet cement.
Eight decades later, a carpet of moss and leaves covered the rotten porch planks. Although entrance through the crooked screen door required a careful balancing act to avoid the collapsed sections, the rest of the building (thanks to the strict building codes) was remarkably sound. During my first field season, I worked on clearing out the milkhouse contents. I hauled out feed sacks, seed tins, hairy coils of baling twine, and a fifty-gallon drum, half-filled with grain, which held five frightened mice (along with the carcasses of many others). One morning, as I scrubbed the rough concrete floor with a brush I'd found on a high shelf in the shed, I sensed, or imagined, Emma Randolph scrubbing the same floor—her knees against the grainy texture of the wet concrete, the grey water sweeping down the open floor drain.

When we decided to open the erstwhile milkhouse to public visitors, replacement of the porch became a priority. I worked with the carpenters as they dismantled the dilapidated structure. Although we intended to reuse as much of the material as possible, only a few intact lengths made it onto a 'save' pile. The rest, spongy with rot, we loaded into a truck for a trip to the landfill. When the carpenters began reconstruction, I sorted through other heaps of scrap lumber around the site to keep them supplied with a second-salvage of wood the Randolphins had collected decades earlier. We rooted around in junk metal piles for footings and came up with a stout iron wheel, a few bricks, and a tapered plough blade to set alongside the re-used gearbox. A deck of thick,
mismatched boards went down over the joists, pieces fit together into a rough but functional platform. When we were finished, only the bright heads of the new nails and the raw end cuts on the old boards revealed that the porch had been recently reconstructed.

**Working through things**

In the previous chapter, I wove a loose web of stories out of Ione's recollections and a selection of residual material. The writing tracked associations between objects and other sources of information to disclose pathways of memory. Discarded, valueless things took on a provisional significance as I worked with them to reactivate a link to the past. This chapter continues to explore the way certain kinds of memory might be co-fabricated through relations between people and things, but it focuses less on imaginative encounters with materiality and more on practical interactions. Let me use the above anecdote to explain.

Two different sets of carpenters—joined across eighty years—assembled the milkhouse porch using scrap material. The contemporary rebuilding of the porch emulated the process that led to its initial construction. An ordinary construction job became an opportunity for encountering the presence of people who built the structure decades earlier. A kind of haptic memory might be said to emerge through the practice of selecting scrap lumber, pulling nails, patching together a deck from irregular materials (and even scrubbing the floor). It is this aspect of experience I want to dwell on in this chapter, the moments when physical tasks—and acts of material reuse, in particular—perform a relation between the past and a present. In these encounters, the past emerges into the present not through deliberate recollection or representation, but through specific, embodied actions.¹

Over the course of my research, I worked alongside dozens of adult and adolescent volunteers as they helped to handle the artefacts, maintain the site, and undertake building rehabilitation projects. Other visitors participated in structured tours and educational programs. In the summer of 2003 I led a series of afternoon workshops on experiential archaeology for 11-14 year olds. Practical encounters between people and objects set in motion a process of understanding through 'doing'. Hayden Lorimer's observations about the field as an 'active archive', where people and place combine and recombine to generate understandings of the past, apply to

the work I describe here.\textsuperscript{2}

The material in this chapter takes the form of a series of anecdotes, encounters, and observations drawn from my field notebooks. I've gleaned moments that seem to speak to the relation I am interested in exploring here, ones in which people activate traces of memory through the use and reuse of materials, recycling experience as well as substance. The modes of memory I engage with here are not always easy to put into words, though they register powerfully within individual subjectivities. The chapter struggles with issues of representation, trying to figure out how to write about experiences that are often inarticulate, felt rather than expressed, and processural, rather than discrete. The focus remains on questions of materiality and memory, and the way waste-things make available different ways of interpreting and encountering the past.

\textbf{Salvage vernacular}

The homestead's buildings resemble the intricate cases caddis fly larva construct out of stream-bottom debris. Bits of wood and metal poke out at odd angles; frequent repairs and additions have muddled the shape of the original structures with uneven rooflines and strange

transitions. The City historic preservation officer dubbed the homestead’s architectural style (such as it is) ‘vernacular make-do’. Decorative pressed tin panels, once installed in style on the roof of a downtown shop, sheath the roof of the Randolphs’ coal mining equipment shed. Shadow stencils from the sides of railroad boxcars cast out indecipherable messages under the eaves of the barn and the milkhouse. In the attic of the farmhouse, a short piece of a dismantled crate patches a hole in the ceiling; the upside-down eyes of an Indian chief in a feather headdress, marked on the wood in black paint, glare out from the split board. The scrappy history of reuse materialised in these patchwork buildings fits into a recognisable tradition of American ‘adhocism’—traceable to a lingering Puritan thrift ethic coupled with a steady stream of consumer waste. As many collage, the reclaimed materials retain a memory-trace of their previous lives. The overlapping biographies of these fragmentary elements gesture toward once-robust systems of manufacture and marketing, now obsolete or overshadowed.

The evidence of salvage vernacular style carries over into fencelines and other practical innovations. Material traces pose concrete riddles, shape-shifting stories of things evolving through uneven stages of production, use, abandonment, and reclamation. Will Taylor, a young man who volunteered with me in 2002, made a habit out of noting the ‘second uses’ the Randolphs put things to. A bamboo ski pole converted into a flagpole was one of his favourite examples. Another artefact—which he dubbed the ‘whatzit’—seemed to be a camera made out of old paint buckets and sardine tins. One day I walked the inner fenceline with Will and a friend of his, Art Mandell, a seventy year-old man who had lived in Montana since he was a child. As we picked our way through the high grass we noted the anomalous objects conscripted for use in the boundary

5 A tradition of innovative adhocism is still active in the North Hills, updated for the cyber-age. Last year homestead neighbour Archie Carlson explained to me his technique for repairing a faulty USB port with electrical tape and nail polish.
fence. Heavy railroad sleepers appeared frequently as improvised posts, along with a pickaxe handle, a car bumper, a section of steel pipe, and a twisted tree trunk (still apparently rooted where it had grown). A tin ash bucket full of stones functioned as a counterweight at one corner post. Bits of ornamental garden fence and snow fence were woven in among the twisted strands of barbed wire. Will admired the battered tin sign—advertising Nesbitt's Orange Soda—which stopped a gap. A few conventional pine posts remained among the interlopers; rot on the tops showed that all of them had been flipped over at one point in their long lives, and reburied. 'When one post rots out for good, you just put another one in the middle,' commented Art.

All of this evidence of material use and reuse can have a curious effect on the person who encounters it. In managed public places (like city centres and shopping districts, perhaps) careful effort smoothes over the evidence of labour. Traces of physical work become effectively invisible, naturalised into the setting. At the homestead, an opposite state of affairs seems to hold. The visitor who moves through the place constantly comes in contact with evidence of physical labour expended in acts of fixing, fastening, building, propping, patching. The actions of the people who accomplished these tasks remain materialised in the landscape, accessible through moments of bodily encounter. Tim Edensor, who has experienced similar effects in his exploration of industrial ruins, describes a sensation of 'corporeal empathy' in these encounters. A sense of 'what it was like to dwell and work within such a place' emerges as one moves through environments marked with human presence. The texture of the milkhouse floor, the stretch of muscles on the rise of a hill, the quality of light through a row of trees, a hand touching a twisted piece of wire in a repaired fence—tactile interactions convey a sensation of sensory memory, a performance of the past.

---

Often, these encounters are so routine as to go unnoticed. During my residence at the homestead, I went to the chicken coop twice every day to let the chickens out in the early morning and to shut them in for the night just after dusk. The exterior door to the coop is constructed of diagonal wooden slats tacked onto a set of vertical boards, furrowed and pitted with age. A wedge of unmilled wood—whittled down into an oblong shape now worn smooth with use—pivots on a single nail to hold the door shut against the building. A second, interior door (which I only began to close when the skunk learned how to open the outer door and began to kill the chickens) fastens with hooks made out of bent heavy-gauge wire. Every day I turned the worn wooden fastener, lifted the wire hook into place. The actions became habitual, unconsidered. Then, one day, I realised that the wood wedge fastener was dangerously loose on its nail. I found a replacement nail (itself pulled from another board) in the tool shed. The act of refastening the latch made me aware of the thin membrane between my task and the task performed by the person who had set the piece before. Though I wouldn’t have thought to describe it this way at the time, the material was offering me a sensation also felt by the other people (and the animals) who had opened and closed this door, fixed the hooks and latches. Emma had also smelled the same heady aroma of the coop on a hot day, listened to the chickens crowing after they laid an egg. Edensor suggests that these experiences can take on an aura of possession, the absent body becoming present through its interpolation with a contemporary empathetic act.

In an environment as intensively worked and reworked as the homestead, opportunities for this kind of corporeal empathy are many. The place materially embodies spatial narratives of human
actions, in this case a taskscape of salvage and reuse. Marie Eithne O'Neill, in her research on patterns of work and dwelling at ranches in the Gallatin Valley in Montana, describes how people draw on historically and spatially specific haptic knowledge to guide their actions and structure their memories. Sensations of touch, balance, sound, position, and movement—gained through corporeal activity and physical work—build up an intimate, unself-conscious awareness of place.

The haptic sensibility may be made durable in physical artefacts, and revived through subsequent experience. 'There's a little bit of you in every fence post, every staple that you drive, every nail that you put in,' comments one of the ranchers she interviews, 'Everything that you do has a little part of you.' Encountering the materiality of these places is also encountering the 'little bits' of self in a fencepost or a shingle. And while awareness of these investments can come through observation alone, it is perhaps most potent in corporeal experience that begins to mimic the experience that went before.

Through the garden gate

A few summers ago, a group of teenagers hung a makeshift swing, with a wide truck tailgate for a seat, in the shade of the box elder tree near the Randolphs' farmhouse. The same group—participants in a wilderness therapy program for troubled youth—also built two garden gates with the guidance of my sister Sarah, who was the homestead caretaker at the time. Before construction began, Sarah sat down with the teenagers and asked them to look around for inspiration. One gate, she suggested, could reflect the place's functional aesthetic—plain design, borne of necessity. The other gate might draw on the artful re-use evident in the homestead's bedstead gates, boxcar-sided sheds, and fruit crate shelves. For this project, Sarah directed the youth to the heap of corroded metal parts jumbled underneath the box elder tree. The teenagers constructed one simple gate of wood slats and timbers. The second gate began with a screen door, and a few mismatched lengths of lumber. The carpenters fastened the door onto a crude panel with ornate antique hinges. They then covered the panel with found materials—license plates and ceiling tin, draped chains and

9 Ibid.: 8.
wheel rims. The finished project hangs at the south end of the garden plot, fastened to the upright posts with a massive iron spike.

I saw this gate for the first time when I returned to the homestead after my eighteen-month absence. I remember feeling unsure about the casual appropriation of the homestead’s materials. I was committed, in theory, to an ethic of re-use and recycling at the homestead. Early on, we had conversations about the importance of learning from the Randolphs and adopting sympathetic techniques for repair and maintenance. But somehow I wasn’t prepared for what this might look like in practice. The transformation of the disused materials by their incorporation in the gate drew attention to their distinctive qualities—the pattern on the pressed tin, the date on the licence plate, the heft of the spike—and made me wonder if the things should have been preserved, included in the collection I had just begun, or set aside for use in future restoration projects. The gate’s air of creative imitation also made me uneasy. I wondered about the implications of a contemporary practice that made no distinction between the features left behind by the Randolphs and those added by subsequent repairs and interventions. The gate smudged the invisible line between the ‘historic’ past of the place and the messy present.
As I came up against the absurdity of preserving the entirety of the homestead's mass of material in an inventoried collection, I started to see projects like the garden gate construction in a different light. The sheer volume of material deposited at the homestead (as well as its ordinariness and degradation) worked against total salvage and storage. In the two summers I spent sifting through the strata of relics and rubbish, I only managed to inventory and store a fraction of the things I found. I practiced curatorial triage, pulling out a sampling of the objects worthy of 'saving', always knowing that I was leaving something behind, always uncertain of my criteria. Initially, I thought of this as a kind of failure. My recovery was partial, selective, incomplete. If only I had more space, more time, I could brush off the coating of dust and insect wings, box up every item, tuck it into the inventory. At some point, however, I began to realise that the objects unclaimed by my erratic salvage techniques opened up other possibilities for encounters between people and things.

If the act of conservation and collection seemed to turn the objects into static artefacts, to deny the things their embeddedness in a matrix of histories and geographies, the inventive recycling of materials offered a radically different fate for the borderline materials. A turning point came for me at the end of my first season of fieldwork. Again, a group of teenagers was based at the homestead for two weeks of work. The group cleared brush and pruned dead wood out of the orchard for the first few days. At the end of the first week, we asked the group to construct a fence around the homestead's remnant rhubarb patch to keep the sheep from eating the stalks down to the ground. The teenagers rummaged around in the lumber piles to collect a stack of rough slats and fenceposts. Within a day, their energetic labours had constructed two sturdy picket enclosures, irregular but functional. Iron hooks and rings from the scrap iron pile formed ingenious latches on the hand-made gates. Unused parts—a heavy chain, a propeller, a wheel rim—the workers hung on the fence randomly. After a few weeks of sun and weather, the new fence was indistinguishable from the other fences and corrals. The materials that had been used in the construction were no longer dormant and decaying, nor were they fixed in a system of conservation. It was about then that I came upon this comment in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades*:

*I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way*
possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.10

The miscellaneous pieces realised a renewed purpose in a structure that extended a pattern of use and reuse long established in the homestead’s landscape. In subsequent work projects, people often made do with substandard materials and improvised solutions to thorny problems with a limited set of skills and tools. Current work mimicked historical practice, and remembering unfolded through a materialised process of recall and reactivation in which the objects ‘came into their own’ as active artefacts.

Mimetic heritage

The creative process through which people take up historic objects and materials and fold them into contemporary forms and functions can be understood as a kind of mimetic activity. Michael Taussig draws attention to the way the mimetic impulse often arises when people come into contact with the unusual or the anomalous. Copying, Taussig suggests, works as form a ‘critical make believe’ which allows people to move into a position where comprehension emerges through a feedback loop of ‘sympathetic magic’.11 This sympathetic magic can also work through other, more structured, enactments of past practices. Living history demonstrations, reconstructed villages, heritage theme parks—all of these reconstructions can be characterised as ‘mimetic heritage’.12

According to Raphael Samuel, ‘If there is a unifying thread to these exercises in historical

---

reconstruction it is the quest for immediacy, the search for a past which is palpably and visible present.\textsuperscript{13} An emphasis on the 'cultivation of experience' produces activities designed to generate a sense of bodily memory even when 'a historically validated link with former times' is absent.\textsuperscript{14} The quest for immediacy also manifests in re-enactments of folk rituals and celebrations—a phenomenon that Robert Cantwell dubs 'ethnomimesis'.\textsuperscript{15} In such instances, embodied (often collective) performances project carefully coded representations of identity and culture to tourist observers and to other groups.\textsuperscript{16}

The imitative work that took place at the homestead differs from other forms of ethnomimetic performance. Unlike organised re-enactments and heritage reconstructions, which are deliberately framed outside everyday experience, the work at the homestead blended in with rhythms of ordinary chores and tasks. The process of practical construction and reconstruction at the homestead resembled more obviously the understated heritage practice David Crouch and Gavin Parker find at work in activities like allotment-holding.\textsuperscript{17} Knowledge about the past built up through practical experience, producing a sensibility that often remained unarticulated. Ethnomimetic performance in a heritage vein often involves performance of a particular collective identity or cultural tradition. This kind of self-awareness surfaced only rarely in the work at the homestead. The impulse behind the activity often went unspoken, folded into the work.

Sensations of corporeal empathy and haptic engagement, which affect the person who experiences them on an intimate register, don't always lend themselves to articulation. As soon as an attempt is made to name these sensations, they often slip away.\textsuperscript{18} Such experience is generative of a kind of knowledge that cannot easily be represented or communicated discursively.\textsuperscript{19} Crouch and Parker use the term 'encountered memory' to describe this production of historical knowledge.

\textsuperscript{13} Samuel, 175-176.
\textsuperscript{14} Simon Coleman and Mike Crang, "Grounded Tourists, Travelling Theory," in Tourism: Between Place and Performance, ed. Simon Coleman and Mike Crang (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002).
\textsuperscript{17} David Crouch and Gavin Parker, "Digging up" Utopia? Space, Practice, and Land Use Heritage, Geoforum 34 (2003).
\textsuperscript{18} O'Neil.
or sensibility through embodied action, rather than deliberate recollection. Memory, in this sense, may remain inarticulate and inexpressible—graspable only in the kinds of speculative evidence I’ve offered here.

Make do

Only a fraction of the Randolphs scavenged materials found their way into new constructions. The majority of the things were piled up and saved, just in case. It is possible to look the homestead’s scrap piles as indexes of unfulfilled intentions, projects that never were accomplished, invention prototypes that never got built. Early clean-up work at the homestead consolidated these deposits into a few designated areas. One visiting couple looked at the scrap iron heap under the box elder tree and recalled a similar collection on a family farm in Idaho. The pile was called the ‘future use’ pile, the man explained, ‘but we always used to call it the “fruit juice” pile, for some reason’. I recognise something of Bill Randolph, Jr., and his father, in this description of a homestead ‘fruit juice’ pile from the novel *Hong in Horn*, first published in 1935:

... rusty scrap-iron, broken-down furniture, old nail-kegs and coffee barrels and tin tobacco signs, bottles of poultry-conditioner and horse-medicine and whiskey-revivifier, old gun-barrels and shoes and hoops and wire bustles and pieces of buggy harness, wornout horseshoes and deer antlers and eagle wings, old catsup-bottles and lard pails and baking powder cans, miles of rusty wire and decayed rope binding the whole smear into one monumental unit of uselessness. Building it had taken old Simmons years of serious application, and he never made a trip to town without raking the municipal dump for something else to fetch home and pile on top of it.21

People who visited the homestead for the first time often responded with confusion to this evidence of exuberant accumulation. The place didn’t conform to their expectations for the past to be clearly sorted, labelled, and presented. No interpretive plaques offered bite-sized bits of history. Splintered lumber piles and scrap heaps still abounded, even after several years of steady clearing and sorting. These visitors sometimes asked when we planned to begin the ‘clean up’. Often, however, the same people grew to appreciate something else as they walked around the site, the seed of a hanging observation. ‘This place is more...’, they would trail off. Other people interpreted the site’s disorderliness as a call to action. Last summer, a young woman remarked, ‘This place

20 Crouch and Parker: 406.
makes me want to do things, clean it up, to make it legible’. 22

The heaps of things—and the quirky example in the ad hoc structures and everyday inventions—invited acts of creative ‘doing’ and ordering. Confronted with the borderline chaos, people began to fix things, to make broken objects function again. Last summer during a workday, Laurie, a frequent volunteer, came across a broken bench next to Bill Randolph’s old house. I have a letter written by one of Bill’s friends, remembering ‘all the places Bill spent his time’, including the ‘hot sunny summer afternoons on a wooden bench along the north side of the house…’. 23 Laurie found the bench, the seat rotted out with drip from the gutterless eave, and dragged it down the road to the tool shed and the scrap lumber pile. In the pile she found a few short boards that appeared to be sections from an old piano crate. Within half an hour, the bench was whole again, set against the north wall of the rebuilt Moon claim shack.

Jenn found a patched-over shirt in a box of rags. The fabric, thin with wear and age, had torn under one arm and was pocked with dozens of small holes made by nibbling rodents. The shirt had already been mended many times. Jenn decided to pick up the process of mending where it had left off decades ago. Her assembly of tools—gathered from archive boxes and overlooked drawers—

22 Later, this young woman crawled into a collapsed shed and found a heart-shaped tin full of treasures—a broken compass, a mirror, a cache of keys.
23 Charley Tiernan, 26 September 1996.
included cloth patches, heavy scissors, a spool of thread, and two rust-scabbed needles. She dragged a seatless chair from a shed and made it comfortable with two sections of rough-cut lumber and a piece of old rug. When she had finished, her tiny stitches and patches had restored the shirt to a semblance of its former self. This intervention, tugging things back from the edge of decay and disintegration, is not quite conservation. It lacks the attention to period detail, to accuracy and method. It is more interested in extending a history of embodied use into the present, working down the seam between then and now. Incomplete artefacts once again take up a place in the world of practical things.

Other things slipped back into use without alteration, simply by virtue of being needed. When I returned to the homestead after a year and a half away, I found handsaws, buckets, dishtowels, ice chests, tea kettles, mallets, and crates from the homestead's sheds all circulating in active duty. Initially, these instances of reuse made me nervous, as if each item that found its way back into the use stream represented some laxness on my part. According to the terms of Michael Thompson's 'rubbish theory', these things had been yanked from the 'rubbish' category to the 'transient' category, and the rhythms of mundane use made them unremarkable, camouflaged by ordinariness (although these were the same items that might easily have slipped into the 'durable' category had I decided to catalogue and inventory them). Gradually, I got over my anxiety about appropriation of the homestead's more useful artefacts for daily use. A few objects came to live in my own toolbox: a flat chisel with a persimmon wood handle, a Doan's pill container I used to hold tacks.

Last summer I worked with a group of children to make a scarecrow for the homestead garden out of heaps of fabric and clothes I'd pulled from the structures. A pirate woman in a moth-eaten wool coat, with hose-washer earrings and wire-coil hair, now raises her rubber-glove hands to frighten off hungry crows. This scarecrow project, and the other appropriations I describe, drew on something like the “public attic” Kevin Lynch proposed years ago. Such projects work against the tendency to discard objects from the recent past. The things are made 'available for rummaging' instead.

---

If we mean to integrate waste into the cycle of use, we must modify our automatic squeamishness. We need to look at it open-eyed, to see its present value so that it can be exploited for its own unique character. Since we expect to continue to produce waste, we must be prepared to reuse, even enjoy, that waste continuously.  

This borrowing from the past carried a peculiar charge. It always felt mildly subversive, as if the act of using the objects liberated them what might have been incarceration in a prison of preservation protocol, or entombment in the landfill. Tim Cresswell’s discussion of the early 1990s scuffle over Stonehenge comes to mind here. According to Cresswell, the conflict boiled down to a clash of views: ‘the view held by the travellers that Stonehenge is a spiritual center made to be used rather than looked at and the view of English Heritage that Stonehenge is a monument that needs to be preserved for the nation’. A similar function vs. form conflict seemed to be at work at the homestead, except that it all played out in conversations among the group of us responsible for taking care of the place, or in my own head as I struggled to decide the fate of particular things.

---

26 Ibid., 191.
Most museums adopt 'non-consumptive use' policies to protect their artefacts 'in perpetuity'. In the language of conservation professionals, what we were doing at the homestead was consumptive use of a radical sort. Objects were used hard, used up, transformed. This was only possible, in a sense, because the objects we worked with were multiple, mundane—barely worthy of conservation, and so open to other appropriations. The uses we put things to often were truly 'consumptive'. This is one area where the tactics I describe in the thesis reveal their potential incompatibility. Many of the instances of radical reuse actively erased material traces of the past that could have been drawn on for other, less invasive, interpretive strategies. By valuing process over preservation (which is often just another form of radical rematerialisation), something is lost even as something else is gained. The practices I detail here are not easily transferable to another site, or even renewable at the homestead itself (eventually the supply of scrap iron and spare lumber will run out). If my intention is to provide a viable model for alternative practice this is a problem. But there may be a way to see these situated experiments as a challenge to heritage in the usual sense of 'holding on' to the material past—instead a 'letting go' or 'going further'.

28 Interview with Chris Ford, Grant-Kohrs Ranch, Deer Lodge Montana, 10 September 2002.
29 Crouch and Parker.
In the 1950s, the Randolphs bartered their cider press to Dr. Pierce for payment on a medical bill. For a few decades it lived over the hill in the Rattlesnake Valley. When Pierce’s son discovered that people were working on the Randolph place again, he offered to donate the press back. Every autumn, when the apples ripen on the gnarled trees, the old press cranks out gallons of sweet cider. Last September we transported the press downtown to perform at an art opening that featured a few of William Randolph’s invention drawings. We set the press up on the sidewalk, a few hundred yards away from the bridge over the Clark Fork River. Passers-by gathered to watch the press grind, mash, and squeeze the apples into sweet juice. The press, an active artefact in the active archive, came into its own through use.

Landfill liminality

When workers at the homestead copied the Randolphs’ bricolage construction, or pulled tools and supplies back into active circulation, the mimetic impulse risked a romanticisation of an era of thrift. The imitation of scavenger practices may, paradoxically, obscure the fact that the initial practices arose as a survival strategies to confront real conditions of scarcity and need. As Suzanne Seriff observes, pursuit of a vicarious recycling aesthetic can easily slip into decorative ‘trash chic’ mode—laden with irony and absent of any functional significance that might link it to the imitated practices. 30 Our construction projects at the homestead, while playful, worked with an orientation to function and necessity that avoided this kind of empty imitation; occasionally, the projects took on a critical edge that engaged directly with the politics of scarcity and abundance evident in the Randolphs’ original example.

A commentary on contemporary habits of consumption often seemed to underlie the emphasis we placed intentional frugality and make-do techniques. Practical action mobilised the homestead's scrappy history to inspire acts of everyday resistance. The presence of the municipal landfill less than a mile away highlighted the reuse rehearsed within the boundaries of the homestead's junk fences. The landfill was visible from the homestead's upper fields, a range of rising summits formed out of the rubble of demolished homes, household rubbish, and construction debris. An allegorical reading of the North Hills landscape casts the landfill as a monument to the principle of planned obsolescence and excess consumption and the homestead as its negative, a relic of an mythologized past, when we 'never threw anything away'. Although the symmetry of this allegory may appeal, it doesn't quite capture what happens on the ground.

The relations between the homestead and the landfill defied any simple moralising reading. Every time we loaded up a pick-up with irredeemable matter and drove down the dusty road to the landfill scale, we breached the boundary between the two sites. In the course of my fieldwork, at least thirty loads of rubbish followed this route—bits of rotten linoleum, furniture stuffed with rodent droppings, frayed twine, urine-stained clothing. The proximity of the landfill allowed for a frequent exchange of goods. Our deposits ended up mashed into the common waste of Western Montana, the gravely sediments quickly bulldozed over the offending matter. Often (though such scavenging is technically prohibited) we would return to the homestead with treasures: last year's haul included a picnic table, a laundry basket, a wheelbarrow, a sheet of plywood, and even an unopened bottle of wine. The homestead's living collection accessed artefacts from the landfill stores.
Our practical acts of reuse—a micro-politics of heritage by ‘doing’—offered a counterpoint to the waste pouring into the hole on the other side of the hill (even as we accepted the ambiguity of this relationship by replenishing our own supplies with scavenged materials). If mainstream society remembers the twentieth-century as a progressive triumph of materialism and consumer choice, the work at the homestead proposed an indirect ‘counter-memory’—embedded in a few patchy fences and ramshackle buildings. This performance of practical memory could work to subvert the normative structures of consumption and disposal. As Crouch and Parker observe, resistance can be located in apparently simple actions. The relearning of skills side-lined by industrial production and over-specialisation—re-glazing a window, patching a leaky hose, repairing a broken hinge—may signal opposition to prevailing practices. This political commitment was, as I’ve already indicated, often understated and difficult to pin down. It emerged not through voiced protest, but through working history against the grain in embodied performance. My evidence that other people experienced these acts as small points of resistance is anecdotal. All I can offer is my own observation of an undercurrent of contrary creativity in the work I saw taking place, and the material evidence of that inventive effort.

Re-habilitation

To take a rusty hinge or a tattered coat and make it useful again is a fairly simple task. It is another kind of undertaking altogether to work the same sympathetic reuse on an entire structure, especially the decrepit buildings at the homestead. One person who is familiar with the homestead asked, ‘Why would you want to save that place? It’s the stupidest thing. That place is gone. It’s like trying to pull something from the compost heap’. It takes a certain faith and foolhardiness to see the shape of a reconstructed building in a slumped husk of rotten boards. The derelict state of the structures is only partly explained by their advanced age and the years of deferred maintenance.

31 This ambiguity highlights a tricky element in any mobilisation of the past to support the politics of the present. In my opinion, Crouch and Parker overstate the efficacy of political resistance that draws on historic practices to support contemporary agendas. In my own research on allotment-holding, I found that while allotment advocates do deploy heritage as a tool in their political campaigning, this deployment can work counter-productively to draw attention to compromise and ambivalence in the historical precedents. Caitlin DeSilvey, "When Plotters Meet": Cultivated Histories in a Scottish Allotment Garden," Cultural Geographies 10, no. 4 (2003).
33 Crouch and Parker.
Most of the structures were poorly built to begin with. Supporting beams and studs of inadequate length are 'sistered' together (overlapped and then connected with a third bridging piece). Uneven pieces of rough scrap wood form mad geometries in the barn stalls and doors. The ubiquitous boxcar siding hides imperfections with expanses of once-red board and batten. Salvaged windows fit into structures randomly, where a space in the irregular framing allows.

Bernie Weisgerber, the former state historic preservation architect, commented, 'The remarkable thing about the Randolph place is that it was a subsistence farm, and subsistence places don't usually survive. Most end up with somebody bringing a bulldozer in and pushing everything into a hole'. After consultation with Weisgerber and other preservation professionals, it became clear that it might be worth stabilising some of the homestead's 'vernacular make-do' architecture, but the poor condition of the structures presented a definite challenge. It was clearly absurd to think about reconstructing the buildings as they had been built. Attention to 'period' details, meticulous craftsmanship, reconstruction of precise dimensions, and sourcing of original materials—the standard criteria for historic preservation practice—seemed to have little relevance here. To achieve the ever slipping 'authenticity', we would have had to ask the carpenters to unlearn their skills, to favour the short split board to the clear straight one, to use only bent nails.

While conventional historic preservation work places emphasis on accurate reproduction and a convincing finished product, the homestead's structures seemed to call for a need a method that honoured, instead, the ethic of salvage and recycling that produced the makeshift structures. Strict adherence to original features and materials would be less important than process. A strategic planning session in 2003 led to an articulation of the intended practice:

The preservation philosophy adopted at the homestead... embraces a commitment to carry on the resilient tradition of materials adaptation and re-use evident... in the site's structures. More specifically, it attempts to balance the gradual decay of the structures with the need for functional space... It does not attempt to restore buildings back to a specific

This statement perhaps raises more issues than it resolves, of course. Balancing decay with rehabilitation would seem to be an impossible task (though the intention was not to reach this balance within individual buildings, to be fair). And the attempt to import a tradition that formed in specific economic and social conditions would seem to be problematic for completely different reasons. Some of these issues became starkly apparent in the first major rehabilitation project attempted at the homestead, also in 2003.

The Moon's claim shack, the structure built in 1889 to house the Moon family and later retrofitted as bunkhouse, workshop, and storage shed, the structure marked with Ione's six-year old measurements and the 1933 'no rain' inscription, was identified as the structure on the property most in need of radical reconstruction. Without intervention, the building would have been a heap of boards within a few years. The roof over one room was hanging precariously, and over the other had collapsed altogether. A tree had grown into one wall and crushed a section of siding. Although observation of picturesque decay might have been appropriate for some structures, this one was too central to the story. We secured a $10,000 grant for the claim shack rehabilitation. Before deconstruction, a restoration contractor (whose business operates under the motto 'Dedicated to preserving and creating history') visited the site to make an assessment of the structure. 'Generally speaking, there is no structural integrity left in the building', he reported. Moon built the shack poorly and the Randolphs' subsequent maintenance hadn't improved on the basic structural defects—no foundation, no internal framing, inadequate roofing, and awkwardly-fitted doors and windows.

The contractor began by removing the exterior walls. The overlapping layers of weathered siding resembled flaky pastry. In some stretches the boards—which ran haphazardly in vertical and horizontal patterns—appeared to be five or six layers thick, each layer tacked on with nails, all of the nails apparently salvaged from other structures. Once dismantled, the walls lay exposed and rotting on the damp spring ground. The contractor had a crisis of faith. 'This building is dead. I can't breathe life back into it.' 'You are the taxidermist,' commented Bob Oaks. So the contractor began work, but quickly it became clear that there was a problem with our scavenger preservation ethic. The homestead's buildings were constructed in a time when labour was cheap and materials were expensive. One friend commented on the construction method used in the chicken coop ceiling:

The buildings are just like the junk drawers—look at that short piece in the roof sheathing. They saved that and used it, but it's harder work to do things that way. It just means they had more labour than materials, or time than money. That it was worth it to build things that way—piecing things together with scraps.

The conditions that produced the buildings no longer held. Plywood and concrete are now relatively inexpensive; the labour of a three-person skilled carpentry crew is not. In the end, the grant money simply wouldn't cover the cost of paying the carpenters to pull nails from scrap wood, or cobble together several old boards where they could use one new one. The attempt to graft the past ethic onto present conditions seemed to fail in many small decisions. If we had chosen the least expensive option, we would have been constructing a prefab corrugated steel shed, not a hybrid shack.

The project resulted in a compromise structure. The carpenters tacked the house-of-cards walls onto a new plywood frame and poured 'sonotube' foundation. Fresh pine rough lumber sheathed the roof, and the 1889 cedar roof shingle pattern was replicated in bright new shakes. The process revealed the contradiction at the base of our good intentions. The Moons and the
Randolphs built things the way they did out of necessity. We copied their practice by choice, and in the end our statement was more aesthetic than practical. When the funds ran out, the carpenters left behind an unfinished structure. On the inside walls, 2x4 studs and raw plywood had taken the place of battered boards and flaking 1909 newspapers (except for the wall dividing the two rooms, which had been saved and reinstalled, tattered paper and all). The contractor failed to find a source of affordable recycled lumber for the other interior walls. Weathered 'barn-wood', which would have resembled the original sheathing, sold for eight dollars per board foot from specialty suppliers (with nail holes advertised as 'character defects'). I looked at the grey stacks of ancient scrap lumber and wondered if I could rescue wall boards from the splintered remnants, but I hesitated to start what I knew would be a thankless task, and the walls remained bare.

One Sunday afternoon in late summer, Mark Vandermeer pulled up to the homestead in his giant flatbed truck. A friend of his on the south side of town was about to demolish a house on a lot she planned to develop with duplexes. She had offered Mark any lumber he could salvage from the structure, and he invited me along to take a look. The cramped one-story bungalow, of non-descript early twentieth-century vintage, was set in a scrubby, littered yard. A single man had lived here, apparently, and the house remained empty after he died. The grubby kitchen sink held a few broken dishes; a bill from 1976 hung on the stained wall. Recovering the materials in the house didn't seem worth the effort, but the Douglas fir planking on the garage walls looked sound. An hour of prying and pulling yielded a respectable load for the homestead. I arranged a trade for more used material—tongue and groove panelling—from a friend with a reclaimed lumber business (which capitalised on the recent increase in the demolition of older homes to make space for a rash of new construction in the valley).

Over the course of two long workdays, a crew of volunteers measured and cut and hammered the lengths of fir and the other mismatched pieces into place on the interior walls of the shack. Jeff Verworn, William and Emma's great-grandson, helped with the project. Second-hand materials, otherwise destined for the landfill, contributed their histories to the patchwork amalgamation. The reconstruction project slipped back into a pattern of reuse and adaptive construction only once the other resources had been expended, and the salvage was necessary rather than elective. I saved an index card that one of the volunteers used to keep track of the
board measurements for one section of wall. In order to bridge the studs, each length needed to be slightly different, and the card shows dozens of overlapping measurements. The finished panelling resembled the scrappy chicken coop ceiling. A sensation of corporeal (and ethical) empathy emerged most powerfully in a moment of practical resonance, rather than deliberate reconstruction.

**Other engagements**

Sometimes, as I have been describing, an engagement between memory and materiality emerged in the process of labour, though practical tasks. At other times, the tasks seem to shade further into embodied make-believe. Children, especially, seemed to use their bodies to understand the history they encountered at the homestead. The hand-pump—a recent addition to the property that looked to be much older—would often have a child or two hanging off the long green handle, thin arms sending water into the sheep trough. When I worked with a group of kids to excavate artefacts from the soil that had underlain the Moon shack, one young girl took over the job of arranging the display. Instead of sorting the pieces—horseshoes, spoons, wire springs, other metal paraphernalia—into categories, she wanted to arrange them in an artful pattern on the interior wall of the building. When I asked her why she chose to arrange the pieces in this way, she said, ‘Because that’s what they did’. Smaller children, when shown a photo of a small boy standing on a bridge at the homestead, asked to go immediately to the place where the boy had stood, to put their own bodies there, despite the fact that the bridge no longer stands there and hasn’t since the 1930s. In these unstructured moments, children seem to discover (and create) the past through an unfolding process of physical engagement. This is a ‘living history’ of a sort, but a relatively free-wheeling version that doesn’t require actors or demonstrations. ‘Historical re-enactment’, writes Raphael Samuel, ‘is one of the oldest of the mimetic arts, and a perennial favourite in children’s
make-believe... a reincarnation, or new incarnation, of quite ancient forms of play.37

Adults played this game of make-believe as well, sometimes in quite intense ways. One young man, Tracey Moon, discovered the homestead through a newspaper article and began a search for ancestral roots in the place. On-line genealogy searches and hazy family stories came together in a shadowy narrative that always seemed to stop just short of the crucial bit of evidence that would prove a connection. The link that Tracey couldn’t find in the archives he manufactured in the present, through sheer will power and not a small amount of sweat. Tracey spent hours working at the homestead over the course of the summer—clearing out the thicket along the access road, pruning the bushy lilac outside the kitchen door. He brought his family up to the place to see the results of his labour, let his young children chase chickens and explore the gully, held his son’s birthday party in the orchard. (At the party, one small boy, turned the abandoned grain binder into an impromptu drum set, with apple branches as his drumsticks). Alaina, Tracey’s wife, pumped water for the sheep to ‘see what it felt like’. Tracey consumed all the information he could find on the homestead’s past until he could reminisce about a spring he never saw, tell stories about the homestead Moon’s intricate family relations. When the summer ended, Tracey had yet to find the missing piece that would fit his Moon lineage into the homestead’s past, but the bond he had forged through acts of imagination and physical experience provided, perhaps, all the confirmation he required.

A group of college students volunteered at the homestead early in the season last year. While one group turned over the soil in the garden plot, a handful of young women joined me in the hay barn. The hay—so densely packed into the structure it appeared, in some places, to be holding it up—needed to be removed, which involved tossing forkfuls down a cramped hatch into the barnyard. The women wore white haz-mat suits and bulky respirators to protect them from toxic pigeon waste. The work was difficult and dusty, but spirits were high and during one break, when I had the camera out, one of the women raised her pitchfork: ‘Let’s do American Gothic’, she said. The two young women posed in a convincing imitation of Grant Wood’s archetypal agrarian portrait, despite the incongruous outfits.

37 Samuel, 180.
A few months later, Jeff Verworn and I spent a sweltering few hours on the same task, shifting hay his great-uncle, and perhaps his great-grandparents, had stored decades earlier. Stationed in the upper loft, I struggled to lift the packed mass of musty fibres with my fork. I pulled away thin scrapings and squirmed as the dust crept under my clothes. Then, I adjusted my position and found large flakes peeling easily away from the rest. I realised I had found the grain of the hay, the pattern that it had been laid down in years ago. Like a film running in rewind, my movements mimicked the motion of whoever had stacked this hay in the loft. In that moment, I could almost sense the sequence of physical actions that led up to the point where I came into the story: the growing grasses in the upper fields, the horse-drawn implement cutting down the ripe stalks, the cart carrying the hay back to the barn, the rhythm of lifting and tossing that placed hay in the loft, where I found it years later and reversed the cycle.

Making place

In this chapter I've narrated a series of stories about how people engage with material culture in a particular place. Although the evidence I offer is mostly anecdotal, the stories I touch on have allowed me to deepen my discussion of the way interpretation might begin to deal with the 'irreducible scrappiness' of residual artefacts. The material past becomes available for appropriation and manipulation through its devaluation. Layers of domestic rubbish and agricultural ephemera remain outside systems of collection and display, and so open to other uses. The recycling of memory through discarded material traces occurs in other places where marginal matter accumulates: attics and cellars, car boot sales and charity shops, derelict sites and rubbish

38 Lorimer, "Telling Small Stories: Spaces of Knowledge and the Practice of Geography," 214.
dumps. Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe, in their work on ‘second-hand cultures’, call attention to the way people forge attachments to imagined histories through appropriation of previously owned objects.\textsuperscript{39} Clothes, furniture, books, and bric-a-brac become conduits to the sensations, tastes, and values of particular eras, caught up in the production of identity. In a more unstructured and expansive sense, as Tim Edensor has observed, people perform similar appropriations in their imaginative use of industrial ruins and derelict sites.\textsuperscript{40} All of these interventions reactivate discards and dormant things to some extent, and in doing so they refuse the encroaching commodification of experience.\textsuperscript{41} As people rework, reclaim, and reanimate things they open up self-directed engagements with the multiple traces of the past.

What emerges from this discussion is a sense of how people produce memory though tactile encounters with physical objects and materials.\textsuperscript{42} The people I talk about in this chapter (myself included) make the place and its past through their active presence there. Acts of bricolage construction and repair produce new material memories; the living history of the place resonates with former practices and future politics. Through direct or indirect mimetic performance, people and things rupture time, fold it in new patterns to bring the past into contact with the present. ‘One

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{40} Tim Edensor, \textit{Industrial Ruins: Aesthetics, Materiality and Memory} (Oxford: Berg, forthcoming).
\textsuperscript{41} Samuel.
\end{footnotes}
form of memory represents the past,' writes Ann Game, 'the other acts it'.43 The modes of memory-making I've been concerned with in this chapter hinge on moments of haptic awareness and tactile experience. Through practical and playful engagements, people transformed the raw materiality of the homestead into an animate field of encounter, an active archive.44 In the process, the place worked back on them. 'The pressure involved in touch is a pressure on ourselves as well as upon objects', comments Susan Stewart.45 A reciprocal transformation took place, with the place absorbing 'a little bit of you' in each repaired latch or picket fence, and the people absorbing a little bit of place into themselves. In the next chapter, I extend this focus on intersubjective experience into a consideration of the material ecologies of remembrance and decay.

---

44 Lorimer, "The Geographical Field Course as Active Archive."
d. Synchronic handiwork
FIRST DRAFT

your service to inven...
scale
makes
the a equal solid
tops of royal...the camera
glare horizon
parts will
with
odd, invented, arrange
have a vane
museums and the idea of the
however
see why
square-mile ice
with the North
handiwork
his name
that of
synchronic propellor
with his daughter
record murderer
numerous
value
minimum
delight
the camera  
may  
record  
odd  
invented  
museums  

placed at  
glare horizon  

your service  
makes  
value  
almost anywhere  
cardboard box  
on the wall  
behind a picture  

parts will  
have a  
numerous  
synchronic  
handiwork  

that of  
invention in  
minimum  
delight
NOTE: I picked these scraps of printed matter from a bushel basket nest in the homestead's harness shed. The text was mixed in with a mass of pits and seeds, woolly fibre and feathers, long johns and holey socks. The basket contained the 1928 license plate as well, and several desiccated mouse carcases. I saved the pits and the mouse bones, and this poem. I like to think that the mice and I share authorship. For the curious, I include a set of instructions:

TO MAKE A MOUSE POEM

Take a place where mice live
Find their nests
Locate a nest that includes bits of printed matter
Pick out a pile of scraps
Next, carefully set each scrap on a level surface
Copy conscientiously the words or phrases that you see
The poem will resemble you. ¹

¹Many thanks to Tristan Tzara, whose dadaist poem instructions run like so: Take a newspaper/Take some scissors/Choose from this paper an article of the length you want to make your poem/Cut out the article/Next carefully cut out each of the words that makes up this article and put them all in a bag/Shake gently/Next take out each cutting one after the other/Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag/The poem will resemble you. Tristan Tzara, Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampsisteries, trans. Barbara Wright (London, Paris, New York: Calder Publications, 1992), 39.
Man-made objects, or natural ones, inert in themselves but much used by careless life (you are thinking, and quite rightly so, of a hillside stone over which a multitude of small animals have scurried in the course of incalculable seasons) are particularly difficult to keep in surface focus: novices fall through the surface, humming happily to themselves, and are soon revelling with childish abandon over the story of this stone, of that heath. I shall explain. A thin veneer of immediate reality is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now, should not break its tension film.

Vladimir Nabokov
*Transparent Things* (1972)

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**Memory’s ecologies**

**Binding**

A box elder thicket crowds the fenceline at the bottom of the homestead’s orchard. Given their girth and height, the trees appear to have seeded within the last half-century. Long before then, the area along the fence accumulated an assortment of farm implements and stockpiled materials: a spike-toothed harrow, a stack of boxcar siding, a grain binder. Unneeded objects came to rest in the widening shade of the weedy trees, and no one paid them much attention. Eventually, the trees began to draw the snarl of iron and steel into their generous vegetal embrace. The edge of a studded wheel fused into grey bark; a branch thickened and lifted over the binder’s mass, carrying with it, and gradually consuming, a loose length of chain; roots twined around steel tines. The binder—designed to cut, gather, and fasten sheaves of grain—became bound in place. Pale lichens encrusted the driving chains that wound round the body of the machine. One of the binder’s moulded iron handles now protrudes from a slim trunk as if to invite an adjustment of the systems of multiplying cell and running sap. The hybrid tree-machine works away at a perennial chore, binding iron and cellulose, mineral and vegetable.
In previous chapters, I worked through alternative tactics for understanding the emergence of memory in material encounters. Chapter 2 assembled an impossible inventory, of sorts. Chapter 3 arranged scrappy documents and things in relation to a partial oral history, looking for meaning as it emerged through association. Chapter 4 looked at how mimetic practices—of recycling and reuse—produce empathetic, embodied memories. In each instance, I developed methods to work with devalued materials without fixing these materials into closed systems of significance. By tracking the course of remembering through specific instances and encounters, I kept my interpretations moving, working through things rather than on them. In this chapter, I extend this project into another realm of inquiry and explore the way processes of decay and renewal mediate encounters with the homestead’s residual materials.

The work I want to do in this chapter faces some methodological and theoretical challenges. Studies of material culture tend to focus attention on durable things, not rotting and discorporating ones. In the past few decades, theoretical approaches that stabilise the identity of a thing in its fixed form have given way to more complex notions of identity as a mutable and living process.¹

However, the pervasive identification in museum and material culture studies between the social significance of an artefact and its physical permanence remains. Recent studies have begun to examine the way social work can be carried out not just in the preservation of things, but in their destruction and disposal. Routines of daily life depend, often, on the material transformation of physical objects: people use things up, expose them to the elements, consume and combine. These processes facilitate the circulation of material and the maintenance of social codes; the death of the object allows for the continued animation of other processes.

My discussion in this chapter moves on from this work on the socially generative effects of destructive practices. As in the previous chapters, I consider how encounters between people and things produce different forms of knowledge about the past, the making of memory through material engagements. In this chapter, however, the things are mutable, caught up in ecological processes of disintegration and regeneration. Like the binder in the boxelder trees, these things have social lives, but they also have biological and chemical lives with a complex historical depth that may only become apparent when the things begin to drop out of social circulation. Here, the production of memory is a curious process—slipping back and forth between different registers. The tactic I adopt works a balancing act along the margin where social death may equal biological revitalization, and where mixed-up materialities refuse conventional interpretive strategies. Like the box elder tree, I branch off on sideways journeys that leave me hanging over open air. I reach down into the litter and look for matter to break down. I send out exploratory shoots only to find that I've wedged myself into the shade of a larger being than I. But I keep at it in my weedy way, poking around to find fertile ground for these slippery ideas.

Nesting

In the previous chapter, I mentioned the work that went into clearing out the homestead's milkhouse prior to the construction of the porch. One bright May morning, while picking away at the debris with a black plastic sack in hand, I uncovered a dingy wooden box, roughly two feet wide.

---

4 Colloredo-Mansfeld: 250.
by four feet long, pushed against the back wall under a long bench. I pulled off the covering piece of corrugated tin to disclose what appeared, at first glance, to be a mass of fibre, bits of woody material, seeds and plum pits. But then I noticed a leather book cover, and another. A stack of battered volumes nestled in the mess. Leaning closer, I saw that scraps of torn paper made up part of the box's packing. I picked out a few legible pieces: 'shadowed', 'show', 'here', 'start', 'Christ'. The words mingled with mouse droppings, cottony fluff, leaf spines. Tiny gnaw marks showed along the spines of the books, half-moons of stolen print. I opened Bulwer's Work, a mottled purple text, to a chapter on 'The Last Days of Pompeii'. A schoolbook (inscribed as the property of Keith Randolph) lay in one corner, its cover almost entirely obscured by litter.

In the centre of the box sat a thick tome, An Encyclopaedia of Practical Information. The Encyclopaedia (copyright 1888) seemed to be relatively intact, save for a small insect bore hole in the upper right corner of the first page I turned to. I carefully lifted the brittle sheets to page 209, and a table on the 'Speed of Railroad Locomotion'. Page 308 detailed cures for foot rot in sheep; page 427 offered a legal template for a 'deed with warranty'; and page 608 informed me that 'Ecuador lies on the equator in South America, and is a republic'. At page 791, a table recording the population of world cities (Osaka, Japan, 530,885, Ooroomtsee, Turkestan, 150,000) I had to stop, lest I crack the book's stiff spine. Below, the brittle pages disappeared into the litter of seeds and scraps, the single insect bore hole still tunnelling down into the unknown. Too perplexed to continue, I abandoned my work in the shed for the day.

I didn't know what to do with this scrambled record of human and animal intentions. My options seemed limited. I could pull the remaining books out of the box, brush off the worst of the offending matter, sterilise them, and display them as damaged but interesting 'period pieces'. Or I
could yank the whole container out and burn the contents, dealing with the problem by destroying it. The contents of the box teetered on the edge on intelligibility. I could understand the mess as the residue of a system of human memory storage, a disarticulating record of discarded and obsolete knowledge. Or, from another angle, I could see an impressive display of animal adaptation to available resources, a mouse mansion erected in the wake of human habitation. It was difficult to hold both of these interpretations in my head at once, though. Books? Bedding? Save? Burn? I had stumbled on a rearrangement of matter that mixed up the categories I used to understand the world.

The books were gradually becoming unhitched from their intended function. But the mice had proposed another function for the printed matter, as raw material for their own habitation. In reasserting the materiality of the books, the mice proposed their own curatorial intentions for the homestead, intentions I could barely begin to register, let alone understand. This was just one of many moments when I came up against the evidence of other agencies rearranging the matter at the homestead. Every time I had such an encounter, I felt both frustrated and challenged; the place had thrown up an obstacle that I needed to work my way around. Only much later did I begin to understand what the book-nest might have been trying to tell me. In the words of Sarah Whatmore, I needed to figure out 'how to hold on after the event to those moments in which researchers find themselves lost for words in the face of some unexpected possibility that bodies forth...'. I needed to begin to think differently about my project, to listen to my confusion and learn from it.

Other labours

Reluctant to disturb the box of scrambled text and the other evidence of rot and ruin, I began to wonder how to expand my understanding of what was happening in my research field to allow other 'sensible forms' to work alongside me in the generation of materials. Could I side-step my confusion by thinking about the mice (and all of the other agents of decomposition and disorder at the homestead) not as adversaries who messed up the homestead's fragile historical

---

5 In 2000, I hauled a box of books found at the homestead down to the rare book librarian at the University of Montana. He pronounced the books—all of them in much better condition than the ones in the mouse-box—as uniformly worthless, either because of their commonness or their advanced state of degradation.
7 Ibid.
record as I tried to read it, but as allies? How could I work alongside the interventions of microbes and mould, rather than against them? What kind of knowledge about the homestead’s past could we produce in collaboration? The move required a shift in my perspective, a willingness to share the role of story-teller.

In this chapter, I share the work of memory with a host of other collaborators. In fact, I often take a back seat as I observe the knowledges produced through the interventions of other beings and forces—micro-organisms, rodents, rainstorms, mould spores. These other-than-human influences peel back layers of natural and social history sedimented in the homestead’s fragmentary artefacts. In the mouse nest, the surface layer of material speaks to the ballast of printed knowledge accumulated by William and Emma to furnish their young lives. Closer inspection discloses the seasonal fluctuations of moisture and aridity that gradually unbound the books, the cellulose fibres separating and remembering their past lives in the grain of a tree, the accelerated decay precipitated by the invasion of the mice. Edward Casey has written, ‘everything belongs to some matrix of memory, even if it is a matrix which is remote from human concerns
and interests’. In the stories I tell here, non-human actors activate the potential effects of these things and expose this matrix of shared memory. The temporality of this scavenging requires an inversion of technique, a method that aims not to ‘save’ things from decay and appropriation, but to let them go, and to pay attention as they disintegrate.

To see what was happening required a kind double vision, attuned to simultaneous resonances. ‘Thinking about natural history and human history is like looking at one of those trick drawings’, writes Rebecca Solnit, ‘a wineglass that becomes a pair of kissing profiles. It’s hard to see

---

them both at the same time'. If you're only attuned to see the wineglass—the material evidence of human activity—then the onset of decay may seem to be entirely destructive, an erasure of memory and history. But if you can hold the wineglass and the kiss in mind simultaneously, then decay reveals itself not as erasure but as a process that can be generative of a different kind of memory, a memory of intertwined pasts.

'[Objects] have to fall into desuetude at one level in order to come more fully into their own at another', comments David Gross. In my dictionary, the ninth (and last) definition for the word 'memory' reads, 'the ability of a material to return to a former state after a constraint has been removed'. The matter that makes up the homestead's structures and features exhibits just this kind of tracking backward, as well as the dynamic evolution into other states. Human labour introduced temporary arrangements of matter—clear window glass, milled lumber, tempered fence wire. But these arrangements are unstable. Century-old glass develops cloudy irregularities in its gradual recrystallization. The grain binder, artefact of agricultural innovation, sinks into the dark loam under the box elder trees and recalls its origins in veins of ore under the dark earth. Lichen grows on a standing building, a symbiotic association of a fungus and algae breaking down milled clapboards to make them available for recycling into new saplings. A lump of soft coal, pulled from the mine seventy years ago, recalls the organic matter of a 25 million year-old forest. The processes of decay and disintegration make legible stories of complex biological, cultural, and chemical lives. The homestead like the abandoned Welsh farmsteads described by Michael Shanks, is a place where 'the very processes of the archaeological are apparent: mouldering, rotting, disintegrating, decomposing, putrefying, falling to pieces'.

13 Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, Theatre/Archeology (London: Routledge, 2001), 158. Archaeologists rely on the power of decay to release (rather than obliterate) memory in their use of carbon 14 dating techniques. Every organism takes up atmospheric carbon during its lifetime. Once a plant or animal dies, the carbon 14 lodged in tissue or bone slowly begins to decay. Radioactive carbon 14 breaks down at a steady rate, converting to the more prevalent carbon 12 isotope. By measuring the ratio of remaining carbon 14 to carbon 12, technicians can estimate the age of a single seed or a scrap of food residue within a few hundred years.
Frozen cushions

It is exactly these processes of mouldering and disintegration that most conservation practices work to forestall. In order for the object to function as a bearer of memory, so the story goes, it must be held in perpetuity in a state of protected stasis. In September 2002 I visited the Grant-Kohrs Ranch in the Deer Lodge Valley, the former home of a prosperous cattle baron (mentioned briefly in Chapter 1). The National Park Service established the ranch as a National Historic Site in 1972 to provide, ‘an understanding of the frontier cattle era of the nation’s history’.14 Chris Ford, the site curator, toured me around the site and shared her thoughts about the site’s collection, which included 27,000 artefacts. The objects, most of them ‘original’ to the ranch, ranged from the unique to the undeniably mundane. (I noticed many commonplace artefacts identical to the ones in the homestead’s collection, though usually in much better condition.) Each item, no matter how ordinary, received special attention. Roles of ‘historic’ chicken wire, rusty horseshoes and broken tools lay on padded shelves, sheathed with plastic and protected with ‘earthquake restraining straps’. Ford confessed that she had thought about placing some of the clutter back in the barns and sheds where it had come from, ‘to just go ahead and mess it back up again’. But her sense of responsibility as a curator made this kind of move deeply problematic. She explained how the process of counting, sorting, stacking, storing and inventory converted things from the category of ‘stuff’ to the status of museum object, ‘and if it’s museum property it needs to be taken care of and preserved forever—that’s kind of the responsibility of it being in that category’.15

15 In a state of the art, million-dollar conservation facility, this logic was carried out to a meticulous (and mind numbing) conclusion. Ranks of sealed metal lockers stood in climate-controlled, rodent-

15 Interview with Chris Ford, 10 September 2002, Deer Lodge, Montana.
proofed storage areas; in the workrooms, special paint protected objects from damaging ultraviolet rays; rows of chest freezers decontaminated cushions and coats of any lingering moulds and microbes. They were 'preserving the stuff so the great-grandkids can come back and see it', said Ford, embalming artefacts so that their physical form remained unchanged.

At Garnet Ghost Town, a former mining settlement in the mountains east of Missoula, a similar logic applies to the remnant structures—a scattering of log cabins and false-fronted commercial establishments. The Bureau of Land Management, which owns and manages the site, has adopted a policy of 'arrested decay' for the popular tourist attraction. Stabilization activity aims to halt processes of disintegration and dereliction, yet retain the appearance of abandonment—the 'ghost town feeling'. Workers spray linseed oil and turpentine on the grey flanks of the structures to deprive microbes of oxygen; new stone foundations poke out from under weathered sills. Garnet borrowed its arrested decay approach from Bodie, California, another mining town turned tourist destination. Dydia Delyser describes the intensive labour that goes into maintaining Bodie's buildings in a state that simulates 'authentic' neglect. The goal is to 'keep it standing but make it look like it's still falling down', explains one Bodie staff member. Garnet's curator, in a telling slip of the tongue, referred to the arrested decay policy as 'arrested development'. The place does have a curiously muffled and inert quality, its buildings, no longer functional, but not allowed to die a natural death.

At Garnet and Grant-Kohrs, artefacts lie in wait for 'future generations' in a state of prolonged life-support. Although forces of decay and deterioration carry on under the veneer of immobility, but there is no sense of these interventions as anything but inconvenient obstacles to the desired stasis. Most places designed to preserve 'the past'—even in an apparently ruined state—take great pains to ensure that the physical and biological processes that underlie that past have been neutralised. The memory encapsulated in these buildings and cushions is a resolutely human

history, and any loss of physical integrity is seen as a loss of memorial efficacy. In July 2003 I attended a historical preservation workshop on the topic of ‘Preserving Place and Culture’, held in a hotel at the Flathead Indian Reservation. The organisers asked Frances Vanderberg, a Salish elder, to comment on the workshop theme. She remarked, ‘I don’t like to use that word, “preservation”, because when I hear that I see all these jars M the cellar sitting on a shelf. Jars sitting on a cellar shelf; houses restored as period pieces; objects decontaminated and placed in sterile collections. These modes of ‘preserving’ rely on a relation to the past that locates memory in ostensibly static material traces. But, as Vanderberg’s comment suggests, and as other cultural practices reveal, preservation is not the only way to manage the perishable traces that history leaves behind.

Remembering the past materially does not always require the sustained presence of the authentic object. In Japan, high temperatures and humidity mediate against restorative building preservation. Timbers succumb to mould and rot, insect damage, or the destructive effects of typhoons and earthquakes. Nobuo Ito describes how these incursions and disruptions have been integrated into a dynamic cosmology that accepts, and even ritualises, the inevitable ephemerality of material remains. Wooden shrines are believed to house the spirits of certain deities. As the buildings gradually wear down over time, the life force of the deity fades. The renewal and reconstruction of the structure, at roughly twenty-year intervals, coincides with the reincarnation of the god associated with it. Cycles of decomposition and disappearance, rather than threatening to undermine heritage resources, generate ‘a system for the preservation of intangible cultural

heritage'.

Susanne Kuchler’s work in Papau New Guinea touches on another mode of relation between cultural memory and fragile material remains. She describes the Melanesian practice of constructing *malanggan*, monuments to the dead, to be placed over human graves. These assemblages of perishable materials—usually wood or woven vines—are decorated with carvings of animals, birds, shells, and human figures. After a certain amount of time has passed (when the human soul is understood to have escaped the body), the *malanggan* are taken from the graves and set in a location (often near the sea) where they are left to rot. Once the *malanggan* have decomposed, the remains are gathered to fertilise gardens. Kuchler describes how this vital memorial tradition turns ‘the finality of death to a process of eternal return’.

The mode of remembrance practiced in the *malanggan* ritual, Kuchler argues, does not require a physical object for its operation, but draws instead on the absence of this physical presence, the ‘mental resource created from the object’s disappearance’. In her work, Kucher emphasises the ‘anti-materialism’ of this memorial practice. What strikes me, however, is not the rejection of materiality per se, but the embrace of the mutable character of material presence, the transformative powers of decay and revitalisation. Kuchler asserts that ‘ephemeral commemorative artefacts’ might ‘instigate a process of remembering directed not to any particular vision of past or future, but which repeats itself many times over in point-like, momentary…awakening of the past in the present’. In this case, cultural remembering proceeds not through reflection on a static memorial remnant, but on the process that slowly pulls the remnant into other ecologies and expressions of value.

These geographically disparate examples of how heritages can accommodate the temporality of decay have a curious resonance with the fate of the homestead site, and other places like it. One of the first people to visit the homestead after the 1996 purchase was the City of Missoula historic preservation officer. I mentioned how his official report counselled against preservation of the site due to its advanced state of dereliction and its relative commonness as a cultural landscape. I haven’t mentioned what he said in private, outside his official capacity. Last summer, when I spoke

22 Ibid., 62.
23 Ibid., 63.
to him about his first visit to the homestead, he commented on how struck he was by sense of a
place where *time* was visible. As he took in the crumbling buildings, the weathered texture of
unpainted wood, the heaps of material slowly consumed by lichen and moss, the decadent apple
trees, he sensed that ‘It was uninterrupted, just let go... except in a few places where things had
been propped up or fixed’. He confessed that his desire then was to let it keep going, to watch as
the traces slowly wore away and disappeared altogether. This desire may not have aligned with his
responsibilities as the agent of historic preservation for the City, but it reflected an appreciation for
the imaginative power of ruins.24

Poet and essayist Bill Holm has written eloquently about the importance of letting ordinary
ruined landscapes continue their slow slide into ‘decay, collapse, rust, grief, solitude’, appreciating
their ‘beauty as they go’.25 Holm writes of the ‘truth in those old weathered boards, their condition
of spiritual and actual paintlessness, their color stripped away by age, history, economics, nature.
They show us part of ourselves not visible next to the windowless, sheet-metal prefab life of the
moment, a part not always cheerful and comfortable to think about’.26 The gradual disintegration of

24 Bill Holm and Bob Firth, *Landscape of Ghosts* (Stillwater, Minnesota: Voyageur Press, 1993); Paul Zucker,
25 Holm and Firth, 8.
26 Ibid., 36-7.
material remains can tell us things about their pasts, and our pasts, that remain inaccessible in an object or structure that has been meticulously restored and preserved. Early on in my fieldwork, I realised that I wanted to craft a method that respected decay, minimised disturbance, resisted the urge to recover and reclaim. But I soon came to appreciate that any act of interpretation involves a disturbance of some kind, a manipulation of matter.

A tension between ‘letting go’ and ‘holding on’ framed every decision I, and others, made about the fate of the homestead’s buildings and the artefacts. On balance, the management philosophy in practice was neither ‘arrested decay’ nor wilful neglect. It resembled instead what Kevin Lynch describes as ‘temporal collage’—a makeshift practice that layers different materials, allowing for the ‘visible accumulation of overlapping traces from successive periods, each trace modifying and being modified by new additions, to produce something like a collage of time’. I eventually covered the milkhouse’s book-nest-box with a sheet of clear Plexiglass. I wanted to retain the energy of decay and disorder, but I had to slow it down so that it remained for people to see (quite possibly evicting the mice). In order to protect the people from the box’s potentially toxic emanations, I had to shield them from it. Perhaps there is no real divide between the heritage work I describe happening at the ghost town and the cattle ranch and my work at the homestead, only a different attitude to the anxiety of intervention. So, in my writing, I go back not to the moment when I fixed the Plexiglass on the box, but the moment when I pulled off the corrugated tin. I try to write through the finding, alongside the mice and the mould, and to find in description a way of expressing the temporality of memory in motion.

Ecology and loss

Looking for memory in the ecological biographies of cultural artefacts may lead to an unsettling confrontation with loss. Miles Ogborn, in a recent essay on the ecology of archives, comments on how these places and their contents, which arise out of a patently cultural desire to preserve the human past, are also amalgams of animal skin and wood pulp, chemical compounds and organic substances. The elements that make up the archive are open to breaches and interventions—from heat, light, moisture, mould, insects, rodents. Ogborn writes, “The storehouses

27 Lynch, 171.
of memory, the central cortices of social formations of print and the written world, are ecologies where the materials of remembrance are living, dying, and being devoured. The 'nature of cultural memory' becomes apparent in the gradual consumption of evidence and images. Where institutional archival collections stave off decay with chemical and technological solutions, the homestead's archival ecology hinges on extreme climatic conditions. The sheds are full of fragile materials like paper and fabric—discoloured and nibbled, but for the most part intact. The persistence of these materials, unprotected and unclaimed, can be linked to the fact that less than thirteen inches of precipitation fall every year on the foothill regions of the Rocky Mountains. Arid conditions placed extreme limits on the productivity of the homestead throughout the twentieth century (especially in drought years), but they make my excavations possible by starving microbes and moulds of the damp they need to do their work efficiently. Materials do rot and decay, but much more slowly than they would in moister regions. The climate is written into the seared texture of the barn boards, the note on the side of the claim shack, the patterns of vegetation on the parched hills. In more exposed areas of the site, remains reveal variable rates of decomposition. Glass lasts longer than wood fibre; I find more marbles than I do corks. Although arid conditions can allow for uncanny survivals, ecological processes still accomplish a gradual erosion of material at the homestead. Contact with these disarticulating remains can open into a sensation of loss. In the archive, this loss can seem to destabilise the institutions of cultural

29 Ibid.
memory. In the ruin, this loss registers more intimately as a subtle destabilisation of self. In the rest of this section, I reflect on this effect briefly before moving on to consider approaches that think past loss into a more expansive sense of materiality and intersubjectivity.

In writings on ruins, one often comes across a melancholy identification between the material decay of structures and the mental decay of remembered images and experiences. "[Ruins] evoke the process of remembering", writes Tim Edensor, "its impossibilities and its multiplicities". It would perhaps be more accurate to state that ruins evoke the process of forgetting, the loss of structural coherence mirroring the loss of memory's internal supports and signposts as a person ages. Encounters with ruined places, writes Edensor, refute 'the notion that memory is wholly recoverable', and call attention instead to its rifts and absences. In a more profound sense, the transience and instability of human artefacts can remind us of our own mortality. In death, comments Marius Kwint, we become 'solely material and blend with our surroundings... the subject will return to the object'. Clearly, encounters with material on its way into another state of being can destabilise selfhood, whether the effect is explained with the 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' reason of Christian theology or in a more circumscribed sense.

33 Edensor, "The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins: Ordering and Disordering Memory in Excessive Space."
34 Robert Ginsberg, *The Aesthetics of Ruins* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004); Pearson and Shanks, 158.
When I try to recall a moment during my work that provoked this kind of awareness, I think of the dust at the bottom of the kitchen drawers. After I’d pulled out the household objects and set them aside for sorting and saving, a layer of miniscule detritus lay at the bottom of the drawers. I identified bits of mouse droppings, rubber shreds, wood splinters, paper, lint, insect wings, plant stems, seeds—all broken, discarded, formless. A finer grain of residue underlay these legible fragments, a slightly greasy amalgam of human skin, tiny fibres, crumbled deposits of mineral and animal origin. I remember feeling dizzy while I examined these leavings, sharply aware that I’d reached the base level of materiality, the place where human artefacts blended imperceptibly into mass of worldly matter.

Other encounters with the ecologies of loss were more absolute. A fine down of ash covered my books and papers when I returned from a holiday last summer. In my absence, fires had consumed thousands of acres of Western Montana forest. The aridity that acts as a preservative agent also makes the homestead vulnerable to the potentially devastating effects of wildfire. Grass fires used to burn almost every year in the hills around the homestead. In 1945, a runaway blaze consumed the Randolpahs’ granary, just missing the house. Since then, fires have been infrequent and easily controlled, but this is no guarantee. A sign, ‘Area Temporarily Closed Due to Extreme Fire Danger’, blocked entrance at the homestead gate for seven weeks this summer. Another battered sign on the harness shed reads: ‘Keep Away Fire’, a talisman of sorts, a reminder of the spectre of total destruction and the vulnerability of the structures (corporeal and architectural) we assemble to shelter our transitory lives.
If you are squeamish...

If there were moments when the ragged materials forced me to confront the spectre of loss in a rather absolute way, there were other moments when I engaged in a more complicated relation with the homestead’s materiality. The analogy that compares the decay of a structure with the decay of memory depends on a conception of a relatively self-contained, knowing individual. When I began to allow myself to yield to these messy remains, I realised that in order to meet them (so to speak) on their own terms, I had to accept that the outcome of the situations I found myself in was not entirely in my hands. Although the degraded materiality unsettled my autonomy as a researcher, only this realisation allowed me to see in the decay and degradation the release of other forms of knowledge. Processes that could be understood as forgetting in one register began to yield sensations of knotted memory in another.

While salvaging stories from the homestead’s remains, I became familiar with my own thresholds for discomfort. Strange smells, cobwebs across the face, the scurry of tiny feet, a smear of mould spores on a careless shoulder—all of these were common occurrences in my excavations. In the sheds and cellars, I encountered what Georges Bataille calls the ‘unstable, fetid and lukewarm substances where life ferments ignobly’.37 Maggots seethed in washtubs of papery cornhusks. Nests of bald baby mice writhed in bushel baskets. Technicolor moulds consumed magazines and documents. Repulsive odours escaped from the broken lids of ancient preserve jars. It was Sappho who wrote, ‘If you are squeamish, do not poke among the beach rubble’.38 I’m not particularly squeamish, and I do poke, but still, the edge of revulsion was never far away. I’ve come to think that my discomfort was part of the riddle I needed to solve. Mary Douglas writes,

It is unpleasant to poke about in the refuse to try to recover anything, for this revives identity. So long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous. It does not even create ambiguous perceptions since it clearly belongs in a defined place, a rubbish heap of one kind or another.39

Almost every object and document needed to be tugged out of the refuse, its identity revived through my labour. There was no easy acquisition of information, no casual browsing through the archive, no passive investigation of an artefact on display.

I found my evidence in a bundle of paper furred with mould; a tangled drawer of stained fabric and mouse carcasses; a workbench coated with greasy dust and insect husks. Last summer a large hairy spider took up residence in a corner of my office; every morning I found a new offering of mummified moths on my desk. Peter Sloterdijk writes of the need for people who can work in a spirit of ‘liberating negativism’, pushing past their nausea to confront material too unpleasant for others to contemplate.40 These encounters, though disagreeable, also served as a powerful reminder of my own entangling with these borderline materials and their active ecologies. I acknowledged the presence of materials that would otherwise have remained repressed, rendered invisible by the codes of mainstream preservation.41

Some elements of my research practice offered starker reminders of the other-than-human histories that I needed to negotiate. In the early 1990s an outbreak of respiratory illness occurred in northern New Mexico, linked to a series of unexplained deaths. Physicians traced the illness to an unknown strain of bantavirus, a viral agent previously detected in regions as dispersed as South Korea and Scandinavia. Infection seemed to be passed on to humans through contact with the urine and faeces of common deer mice. A decade later, no cure has been found for the disease (which is now called the Sin Nombre virus), and it has moved steadily north. Deer mice in the North Hills, where the homestead is located, have tested positive for the virus. I wore a respirator and carried a spray bottle of bleach when I cleared out rodent-infested areas at the homestead, but even so my work was, in a sense, haunted by the fear of contracting this ghostly illness. Although very little progress has been made on identifying effective responses to the outbreak, studies of the virus have revealed that it emerges in the wake of ecological disturbance, and may be linked to chance events such as El Nino (which caused a spike

in rodent food plants, and populations). My disturbance of the homestead's micro-ecologies came up against the reassertion of a viral biological imperative.

These viral and other interventions introduce an element of instability that unsettled my excavations, and frequently led me to question whether or not my efforts were worth the (often invisible) risks. Curiosity kept me tunnelling through the debris, seeking out encounters that exposed the tangling of cultural and natural material. The root cellar contained several maps in its dim corner and crates, each one spectacularly degraded in its own way. One excavation turned up a U.S. Forest Service map of the Beaverhead and Deer Lodge forest management districts, just west of Missoula. When I unrolled it, I discovered an ornate fringe along the bottom edge where an insect had consumed the represented territory. The insects had intervened to assert the materiality of the map, and in doing so they offered their own oblique commentary on human intervention in regional ecologies. After decades of poor management, an infestation of destructive bark beetles now scars the physical territory represented by the disfigured paper map. Although I suspect moths (not beetles) edited the map, there is still a way of reading this ragged document as an assertion of other histories. An intact map might have led me to speculate on William Randolph’s involvement in various timber lots in the region, but the beetles would have remained silent.

Other documents showed equally spectacular evidence of insect and rodent editing. In their degraded condition, these documents carried an unusual charge. I had come up against an absence in the record, but an absence that seemed to carve out a window in the wall that keeps cultural analysis separate from investigation of ecological processes. It required some imagination to work past the initial awareness of missing information, but once this had been overcome I could see the emerging shape of an engagement with the past that, in Kuchler's terms, 'does not cease when there are no longer any traces of what is to be remembered, but draws force from this absence'. The force drawn from these engagements channels into alternative interpretive possibilities that may allow artefacts to remain caught up in dynamic processes of decay and disarticulation. The autonomous exercise of human intention gives way to a more dispersed sharing of the practices of material editing and manipulation.

Sometimes biological and chemical processes, rather than opening up an apparent absence, generated bewildering accumulations of excess matter. I found sacks full of feathers and leaves, bushel baskets of wool and fibre, neat stacks of twigs. It was not always obvious to me how these gatherings of materials were assembled. The tidy collections mocked my own efforts at sorting and conservation, and troubled the distinction I tried to draw between animal and human labour. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the homestead's tack shed contained a few tin cans packed with pits from the wild plums that grow in the gully and the tiny smooth stones of the orchard pie cherries. Each of the pits was neatly scraped down to the woody centre, and marked with a single chewed hole through which an animal had extracted the edible seed core. In the farmhouse pantry, I found dozens of jars of saved garden seeds that were linked into the same collecting impulse. The root cellar's dusty shelves held cloudy jars of cherries, rhubarb, and tomatoes. In a crate below the shelves I found a 1937 post-marked envelope full of seeds, and a twist of catalogue paper around a handful of white snail shells. Nearby a pillowcase hung from a nail, the bottom eaten through to let out a slow leak of feathers. An ambiguous affinity seemed to hang over these animal accumulations; intertwined memories of seasonal harvest and hoarding seeped out of the jars and tins and bins.


\[44\] Kuchler, 59.
All of the encounters I’ve been describing in this section involved some attempt to work past, or to work with, sensations of disgust and revulsion. I wanted to salvage something from these ambiguous materialities, and in order to do so I had to resituate the borders I’d erected between my self and the world of waste things. Michael Taussig brings this insight to bear in an essay on the peculiar character of bogs and swamps. He muses on the ways boggy, rotting places expose ‘the suspension between life and death’, flitting ‘between a miraculous preservation and an always there of immanent decay’. Taussig acknowledges how difficult it can be to encounter amalgamated deposits of cultural and biological memory: ‘What you have to do is hold contrary states in mind and allow the miasma to exude’, he writes.

A packrat lives in the attic of the farmhouse. Nest material heaps up against an eave, an unruly tip of leaves, paper, sticks, scraps. Sometimes bits of nest sift through the seam between the ceiling and the wall of the room below. A small drift of paper, sawdust, and dung pellets has collected on the floor. One day I crouched down to read the messages deposited there. I found a series of dictionary scraps, confetti definitions. Unfamiliar words idled in a state just short of extinction: ‘brabble’, ‘angelology’, ‘aleshot’, ‘crepance’. Working ones proclaimed their usefulness: ‘box elder’, ‘elliptical’, ‘branch’, ‘condensation’. At Hyde Park Barracks, near Sydney, Australia rats collected the ephemera of daily life in their nests between the floorboards. When restorationists and

---

45 Taussig, 15-16.
46 Ibid., 16.
curators discovered these hoards they decided to create a display to celebrate the findings. 'Rats are honoured at this site as the minions of history,' writes Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.47

Living memory

In this chapter, I've been trying to explain how ecological interference might be understood as a positive element in a certain kind of memory work. The processes I've been describing open up breaches in human agency and identity, but do so in order to imagine an expanded sense of the pasts we might call our own. In this section, I want to take this understanding one step further. The same processes of decay and disintegration that unravelled the homestead's human fabric also established ideal conditions for the renewal of other forms of habitation. Animals and plants thrive in an ecological niche created by the place's borderline dereliction. These inhabitants carry with them their own complex biographies, and their own memories of other places and other people. Leaf litter and lumber heaps shelter rabbits and ground squirrels. Deer take refuge in the overgrown orchard and plum thickets. The disused barn houses a colony of mourning doves. Rotting buildings

shelter countless insects and micro-organisms who write their life histories into the walls.\textsuperscript{48}

To use a term coined by environmental historian James Feldman, the place is gradually 'rewilding'.\textsuperscript{49} This is not a return to a pre-disturbance 'wild' state, but a reassertion of biological imperatives in a place that had been dominated by agricultural and domestic ones. William Cronon, in his application of Feldman's concept to a series of Wisconsin islands, writes about how rewilding places pose a riddle for those who would try to interpret them, especially those accustomed to drawing a clean line between human and natural histories. Instead, he suggests, stories need to attend to the many different ways in which places are inhabited. A few scholars have begun to take seriously the telling of these complex histories of cohabitation. Laura Cameron, in her investigation of a drained British Columbia lake, extended her oral history work to collect the imagined memories of the mosquitoes who once lived and bred in the lake's waters, and Hayden Lorimer has tracked the memories of a Scottish reindeer herd and their movement through a storied landscape.\textsuperscript{50} In the short piece that opened this chapter I shared my own attempt at giving voice to the poetic sensibilities of the homestead's mice. Other inhabitants I have yet to mention, except in passing.

A herd of whitetail deer lives in the draw around the homestead. The does drop their young in the tall grass of the upper orchard in June. By the close of the summer, the bold fawns move at the front of the shifting herd as they fan out over the hills seeking food. During my two seasons of

fieldwork, I shared the homestead’s draw with the deer in a wary truce. When I walked around at dusk the deer would often stamp and huff to warn me away. During fire season, when I was the only person on the site for weeks, they would graze up to the edges of my trailer and gaze at me mildly when my movements caught their attention. In the sense that the deer remember their past, it is one marked by changing fortunes. Before white settlement, the populations were kept in check by predation and hunting. While intensive agriculture and grazing claimed the hills, habitats declined and deer were rarely seen. Now, in the post-productive West, deer populations have spiked. One evening I counted a herd of twenty loitering at the access road to the homestead. The rewilding of the homestead is not entirely compatible with the renewal of human activity at the site. When large groups of visitors arrive at the homestead the deer disappear over the hill and the ground squirrels remain hidden in their sandy holes. As one observer commented at a workday, "The sense of accomplishment to be had from cleaning up... is offset by an unsettling sense of chasing off". 51

The box elder bugs are not particularly bothered by our presence. They appear in August as a scattering of tiny raspberry-red bodies poking about on pinlegs near their host trees. Within a few weeks, their numbers have multiplied; seething clusters gather on the scrap iron pile in the sun. The older bugs have handsome grey bodies with red racing stripes. The trees that give the bugs their name tolerate the annual explosion of insect life with grace. Bug and tree have what Holm calls, ‘a harmless, amiable, parasitic

---

friendship’. Box elders, a maple species common to the American Midwest, tend to be unfussy trees as a rule, willing to grow wherever they are put down. Settlers introduced them to Montana to domesticate the barrenness of their new homes. The bugs hitched a ride, and now return every year in force to remind the world of the porosity of ecological boundaries, the willingness of organisms to colonise available habitats. The bugs love to hide in the shabby siding of the old farmhouse; in the winter they creep into the loose seams of the building to wait out the cold. Their habitation of the homestead is understated, conspicuous only in its persistence.

Inside the farmhouse, on a wall where the box elder bugs take up winter residence, I found a few pieces of cardboard pinned (and nailed) with the brittle remains of butterfly and moth bodies. One board was marked ‘June 1938’. Will Kerling, a local butterfly enthusiast, identified the remains for me: Bois Duval’s Blue, Sulphur Orange, White-lined Sphinx. The Painted Lady was no more than a dusty shadow, an imprint of scales and pigment deposited on the cardboard after the wings had crumbled. Will identified one tattered specimen as a Western Tiger Swallowtail, or perhaps an Anise Swallowtail. He’d not yet been able to document the presence of the Western Tiger species in the North Hills, and he left excited by the possible confirmation of a previous presence. The other species were accounted for in the logs of butterfly sitings. When he left, I thought about the information contained in the fragile body of a sixty-five year old butterfly, codings of climate and habitat. Another rare butterfly species lives in the homestead draw and feeds on a remnant stand of native buckwheat just north of the orchard. Will stakes out the plants with bright orange flags each year to remind the people with herbicide sprayers and grazing sheep to steer clear. These stories of butterflies and humans making place and marking time reminded me of

Nabokov’s ruminations in *Speak, Memory*:

I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness—in a landscape selected at random—is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love.  

Such a sensation of spatial and temporal folding sometimes came upon me in the homestead’s decadent orchard. There, among the gnarled bodies of the trees, I could imagine over one-hundred annual cycles of budding and harvest: Ray and Luella Moon kneeling to set each sapling in the newly dug earth, lone climbing up to snatch an apple from a high branch, my first gleaning expedition. The trees and their fruits (which grow sparser and wormier every year) recall in their cells a deeper history: the long journey from Asia and Europe, bearing the heterozygous genes that would allow them to adapt to wildly variable North American climates; the gradual breeding into domestic varieties with names as distinct as their flavours and shapes. Duchess of Oldenburg, Winesap, Chestnut, Macintosh. The homestead came into being with the trees, and as such the trees are a part of the material memory of the place. Their presence clocks the seasons; their twisted forms reflect a prolonged (and, for the most part, amicable) negotiation over access to the summer sunlight. During the course of the last century, people often used the orchard prunings as raw materials for repairs and improvements: a fencepost here, an *ad hoc* hook there. Other inhabitants depend on the

---

trees' presence for their own survival. Hollow cavities offer habitation for the transient life cycles of birds and insects. A noisy family of flickers—a species of woodpecker—nested in one half-rotten tree last summer. As Michael Pollan aptly illustrated in *The Botany of Desire*, the apple orchard is a convergence zone for ongoing processes of acculturation and rewilding.\(^{56}\)

**Grafting**

Walter Benjamin, according to his friend Theodor Adorno, read 'the petrified, frozen, or obsolete elements of civilization' as if they were rare fossils or 'the plant in the herbarium'.\(^{57}\) 'In the process of decay', Benjamin wrote, 'the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting'.\(^ {58}\) Benjamin's approach blurred the distinction between nature and technology, or fused them in a conception of 'historical nature'.\(^ {59}\) Although my project obviously aligns with this approach, I wonder if it also moves off into other territory. The things I have been trying to describe in this chapter are not petrified, frozen, or fossilised. The mutability and instability of these things is often what drew me to them. In this sense, my work applies Benjamin's ideas in a slightly altered form, though it remains committed to the need to hold attention on ruined and unwanted things. 'In the ruin,' Benjamin claimed, 'history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay'.\(^ {60}\) In this chapter, I've been tracking history's irresistible decay through the homestead's scattered remains.

This chapter worked with materials lodged in a state between 'waste and life, decadence and

---

56 Pollan.
60 Benjamin, 178-179.
vitality'. I tried to perform an archaeology of ambivalence, rather than recovery. In doing so, I invited interventions from organisms and processes usually excluded from the interpretive ambit. The stories in this chapter pivot on moments when I was able to see the homestead’s disintegrating materiality as something other than a display of irredeemably damaged goods. I’ve tried to show what it might look like to think past the loss of patently ‘historical’ information, to witness how things get caught up in ecologies that generate different kinds of knowledge about the past. As I worked along these lines, the human activity that went into constructing the homestead began to look like just another layer of habitation. The disarticulation of human remains led to the articulation of other histories (and other biographies).

If the homestead were to perform as a truly ‘ephemeral monument’, the processes I have been describing would be allowed to consume it altogether. As long as the City of Missoula owns the site, and people continue to enjoy it, this is unlikely to happen. The encounters I describe in this chapter took place in a temporal window that allowed for experimentation with alternative methodologies. Future management of the site will have to find a compromise between a celebration of entropic heritage and the conservation of material traces. I don’t believe that the insights I’ve been sharing here need to be applied comprehensively to achieve the sought-after understanding. In fact, comparative approaches may be more effective at drawing out the interpretive value of these unorthodox approaches to decay and degradation.

As a tactic for apprehending memory as it emerges through encounters between people and things, this is a tricky one. If the other chapters were more concerned with the form and the architecture of memory, this one is perhaps more attentive to its content. The receptivity that I

---

62 Forty, 4.
cultivate here allowed me to register effects that would have been indecipherable, or disruptive, if encountered while pursuing any of the other tactical approaches. I worked with an ecology of memory: things decaying, disappearing, being reformed and regenerated, shifting back and forth between different states, always on the edge of intelligibility. The chapter shares the labour of remembrance with a host of other-than-human agents, though in the end I am the one who articulates what we found there. Along the way, the collaborations and transformations subtly undermined my sense of autonomous subjectivity. I had entered into a complicated relation with the materials of my research practice. ‘Those social actions that are contingent on consuming, using-up, destroying, and vanishing… sharpen the dilemmas of intersubjectivity,’ comments Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld. In this case, intersubjectivity was not so much dilemma as opportunity. There was an historical dimension to this awareness, a sensation of the ongoing relations between human habitation and ecological material in a particular place. These insights link to the emphasis in previous chapters on the intricate relations between memory, materiality, and subjectivity—whether it is the complex personhood of Chapter 3 or the mimetic sensibility of Chapter 4. In the next, and final, chapter I draw all of these themes together in an attempt at resolution.

e. One morning
CHAPTER SIX
Object lessons

I remember entering the back bedroom of the farmhouse for the first time. The square room, sheathed with dingy green bead-board from the buckled floor up to the bowed ceiling, felt strangely like the cabin of a wrecked ship, lit with a dim underwater light. In one corner, a few collapsed ceiling boards let down a drift of sawdust and torn newspaper. Cobwebs netted the bare springs of a mattress where it leaned in front of a window whose panes, freed from their rotten frame, had slipped down and left gaps to the wind and the rain. Heaps of old clothes and boots lay scattered about, but my eye was drawn to the collection arrayed on the far wall.

A row of cardboard mounts ran along near the ceiling, two decorated with husks of onions and shallots, two others pinned with the tattered wings of moths and butterflies. Below this tier, four images, their edges curled with age and damp, charted a sentimental rural iconography. A scrap of wallpaper etched with the stylised bodies of yellow butterflies. A clipped image of a bucket filled to the rim with pale milk and set in a field of washed-out daisies. A magazine print of two cocks locked in combat, feathers akimbo, captioned ‘Discord in Paradise’. In the fourth image, a young boy held a bunch of carrots tied to the end of a stick. He poked the lure into a round hole in the side of a hill, expectant. Behind his bent back a rabbit peered out of an identical hole, curious and unconcerned.
Here, at the beginning of the end of the thesis, this alignment of hunter and hunted seems particularly apposite. I spent two years kneeling in front of a dark burrow, waiting for my prey to take the bait, when all along the object of my attention was ready to bolt out the back door. I set out to fix my attention on things in the gap, the moment when their value had yet to be decided, when they retained some element of ‘multiplicity and mystery’. But the very act of paying attention, more often than not, nudged the object farther away. I was left with a limp bunch of carrots, and a sense that the things I was looking for were always about to make their escape.

Tactical salvage

At the beginning of the thesis, I promised that I would root around in the rubbish and try to make sense of what I found there. I wanted to understand how the past comes to be materialised in place, and how those who come along later encounter that past. I began with a story about my own early encounter with the homestead, my fascination with the uncanny juxtapositions, the air of decay and abandonment. Confronted with a deposit of disordered materiality, I sensed connections that seemed to challenge what I thought I knew, traced associations between things that told fractured stories and half-truths. In my research, I set out to improvise with methods that would allow the things to retain their power to unsettle, to provoke different readings, to align in unexpected configurations. I called what I was looking for in these moments ‘memory’, but, as has become clear, I was really after memories—each distinct from the other, and each performed through interactions between people and things.

If a memory, understood broadly, is an apprehension of knowledge about some element of past experience, then the knowledge we produced took on complex forms. Sometimes it refused expression and remained inarticulate. At other times it emerged in embodied encounters and affective understandings, or in intellectual recognitions. These memories could only be detected in motion as they stitched a connection between a not-so-distant past and a shifting present. In a series of linked tactics, I tried to engage in (and engage other people in) the memory work that could provoke these various knowledges. I experimented with creative inventory, associative story-

telling, practices of re-use and recycling, and ecological observations. All of these tactics dealt, in some way, with the 'irreducible scrappiness' of the things they came in contact with. The fragmentation and incompletion of the objects and documents continued to work curious effects.

Chapter 2, 'Inventory and intervention', described the process of gathering and inventorying the homestead's disordered artefacts to facilitate their placement in an on-site collection. The chapter engaged with the possibility that certain kinds of archival practice might expose traces of idiosyncratic, affective memory frequently occluded by conservation and collection. The work of a series of contemporary artists framed ideas around the inventory, interpretation, and display of 'rubbish' objects. I concluded with a discussion of how the work performed at the homestead might be understood as a form of site-specific practice, a mediation between materiality and place in which objects are rearranged by people, and people are rearranged by the objects in turn.

'Recollections', Chapter 3, spun a net of stories out of discarded objects and oral reminiscences. A set of linked constellations tracked associative paths of memory, like those active in processes of individual recollection, through material residues. Encounters with memory emerged through the alignment of discontinuous traces; marginal things, placed in relation to other things, accrued a contingent significance. The chapter explored how ordinary, outmoded objects can offer a window on the past that touches on intimate sensibilities as well as political and social commitments. A sense of complex historical subjectivities emerged from this erratic remembrance—highlighting the ways in which the material world is tangled up in the production of self.

Chapter 4, 'Making use of things,' tracked the effects of physical, rather than imaginative, realignments. People took up the homestead's scrap materials and incorporated them into new constructions, working a bricolage that (sometimes) opened into an empathetic relation to the place's former inhabitants. The tactile handling and manipulation of things produced a kind of embodied memory through the mimetic performance of skills and techniques. Haptic echoes of previous experiences emerged as people 'made use' of complex material remnants. I identified within this mimetic practice an embedded critique, a subtle undercutting of normative systems of production and consumption.

In Chapter 5, 'Memory's ecologies', I worked with things as they were on the point of disappearance, almost illegible in their state of disintegration and disarticulation. The chapter further developed the concept of memory as a fluid element produced out of specific encounters. In this case, the encounters often involved animals and other life forms as well as humans, and moments of forgetting on one register could look like remembering on another. Once-durable objects and documents were observed in various states of appropriation, disappearance, and revitalisation. The stories that came out of this chapter revealed intertwined natural and cultural histories, effecting a subtle destabilisation of apparently autonomous human subjectivity.

Each of these modes of remembrance worked a different inflection of memory, materiality, and place. As I've mentioned before, I did not intend these tactics to be compatible or cumulative. As they are written into the thesis, the different approaches can seem to complement each other, but just as often they remain out of kilter, concerned with disparate strategies for disclosing memory in material relations. In the next section, I consider how salvage, ultimately, led to profound alterations in the objects of my analysis. The following section considers the corresponding alterations that occurred in the people who encountered the objects. I work towards a conclusion by discussing the ethical and political implications of this work.

Recycling memory

I framed this research around my intention to defer the closure of the fixed interpretation, to work in the gap when the value of these things was yet to be decided and their air of clutter and excess remained intact. As I move to draw the thesis to a close, I am aware that accomplishing this
aim turned out to be much more difficult than I'd anticipated. In each of the various interventions, I came up against moments when I had to admit that my attention—rather than deferring closure—was only creating a closure of a different sort. My associative work with the resonant objects and Ione’s recollections retained only a faint trace of the fragile indeterminacy I found so appealing at the outset. The eclectic construction projects led to a gradual process of rationalisation as items once discarded in heaps of junk became incorporated into gates and swings and fences. Even the light touch I exercised in my observation of the homestead’s gradual decay disturbed the state of entropy I was interested in. Again and again, I came up against the paradox embedded in my project. ‘Objects framed as ruins need our attention and care because they are always threatened by loss,’ writes Michael Roth, ‘but if we care for them too much, their status as ruins is threatened’.3 In a sense, as soon as I began my research, the intent—to hold on to the bewilderment and disorder—became an impossible one. The bewitching mess I was drawn to in my early encounters gradually disappeared in the course of my invasive salvage.

Any act of salvage converts the material it encounters, removing it from one realm to do work in another. It is possible to look at the disruptions I performed in the course of my research and see only what was lost, the ‘excess meaning and matter’ gradually rationalised in the name of

There is another way to understand what took place in those sheds and shacks, however. If each of the interventions I (and others) performed led to a loss, they also worked an addition, the formation of something new from the piles of unwanted matter. Sometimes this creation was physical (a swing, a mended shirt) and sometimes it was more ephemeral (a particular way of telling a story, a glimmer of value in a worthless thing). The loss we initiated, though destructive in one sense, was also transformative: 'a loss that is also at the same time renewal'.

Though I set out to form a practice that would circumvent the reductive effects of conventional conservation, I needed to recognise that just 'letting things be' was not a real option either. In order to recover value from these things, I had to disturb them. As Benjamin commented, 'What has been is to be held fast—an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability. The rescue that is carried out by these means—and only by these—can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is already irretrievably lost'. My most useful insights often flooded in just after I had disturbed something irrevocably. The destructive element in my research practice allowed the remnants to become incorporated into resonant interpretations and material entities that lived in the present. The point, it seems, was not about intervention or avoidance, but about choosing what kind of transformation to work in the name of remembrance and renewal.

In the first chapter, I outlined a performative understanding of memory. I suggested that memory comes into being as people do things with things and, in turn, as things do things with people. When people enrol objects in conservation practices they are doing memory in a certain way. When a Roman coin leaves its hold in a buried clay pot and enters a museum display, when a restored house becomes a stop on a heritage walk, when a memorial is erected to honour the war dead of an English village—in these instances, people are doing things with things to produce memory that fits particular normative expectations. In most heritage and conservation work, I would argue, the material transformation that happens in the name of remembrance is about enlisting objects to meet certain social aims. These aims can be about establishing the coordinates of a shared history (usually to the exclusion of other histories) and confirming claims to cultural

---

The kind of experimental practice I've been describing in this thesis takes a slightly different
tack around the enrolment of objects in practices of remembrance. Although I accept that my
‘doing’ was a large part of the work that was going on the homestead, I'd like to suggest that tactics
I adopted were more than commonly receptive to the kind of memory that emerged from things
doing things with people. The objects at the homestead could seem to ‘strike back’ and propose
unsolicited interpretations of their pasts, whether it was the ghost child tracing a dolly’s foot, the
sudden sensation of corporeal empathy while scrubbing a concrete floor, or the interjection of

7 Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (London: Verso, 1991); David
9 My earlier caveats about the limitations to any attempt at total, disciplining heritage apply here as well, of
course. Mike Crang, "On the Heritage Trail: Maps of and Journeys to Olde Englande," Society and Space 12
(1994); J Tunbridge and G Ashworth, eds., Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict
politics into a handbag. I don’t want to suggest that the objects necessarily had a volitional power in these encounters, or that they were always capable of independent action. The kind of remembering I explored in the thesis was relational, a transitive encounter that required completion by a human subject. I do want to suggest, however, that in these relations it could feel as if the things had their own way of acting back. The things were active participants in the performance of memory in many modes. Sometimes they worked to produce only an apprehension of absence, an almost-memory that shaded into haunting. ‘Being haunted,’ writes Avery Gordon, ‘draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a little bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition’. If I accept that the transformation of the objects was an inevitable outcome of my research practice, I also need to acknowledge the transformation of my self, and of the other people who engaged with the homestead’s materiality.

Return

My route to the homestead on that August morning cut underneath Interstate 90 and up the edge of the westbound on-ramp. The gap in the fence was still there, leading to a slim path through the weeds. The path climbed steeply above the highway and a severed pocket of green once connected to the neighbourhood’s backyards (where men and women with nowhere else to go were just waking up under the shaggy cottonwoods). At the Randolph property boundary, the path turned abruptly right and followed the car-part fenceline through stands of brittle balsamroot and knapweed; startled grasshoppers bounced against my breastbone. I was walking over the hill for the first time since I’d packed up at the end of my second fieldwork season ten months earlier.

I cut down into the gully, taking in the sparse yield of apples on the orchard trees, the overgrown grass (no sheep this year), the familiar shapes of the old buildings, the ragged tomato plants in the garden enclosure. It had been a quiet summer, I knew, with no caretaker in residence and only a handful of work parties. But somehow the place still felt tended, cared for. The hose was coiled next to the hand pump. In the milk house, the fruit box display had acquired a few new items (and a peppering of mouse droppings). As I walked around, a curious fawn watched me from a safe

distance. The collection room in the Moon’s claim shack was just as I’d left it—rows of cardboard boxes arranged in serried order on the metal shelves, the dim glow of the patchworked wooden walls, the artefacts arrayed on the top shelves greeting me like familiar faces after a long absence. I carried a list of items I wished to photograph: I found each one in its proper location, where I had left it. I brought these things outside to the old workbench, which had been moved during the reconstruction from its place in the front room (‘No Loafing in Shop’) to the exterior wall. A tacky film of black grease embedded with tiny fragments of metal and fibre still coated the top of the well-used surface. The photos show the backdrop of the clapboard wall, and the black, pitted top of the workbench.

Now, sitting at my desk in England, this morning at the homestead comes back to me, layered with another day seven years distant. I remember my first encounter with that shack on the apple-gleaning expedition. I looked through the begrimed windows at the shoots of green pushing up through the floor, the scabby peel of newspaper on the walls, the litter of abandoned tools and materials, the curious paws above the door lintel. I recall my bewildered curiosity, then, and my casual recognition, two months ago, and I’m left with a riddle. I set out to pursue the disorienting effects activated by encounters with the homestead’s unruly materiality. After seven years, I had accomplished something, but the outcome was quite different from the one I imagined at the outset. Disorientation had become orientation; a confrontation with a realm of otherness had become a confrontation with an intimately known place. I was at the other end of a process of ‘transformative recognition’ that left me as changed as the things I claimed to understand.

If I think about the process that led from radical unfamiliarity to easy recognition, I realise that I was led through this transformation by the objects. Pulled out of the current into an eddy of unfinished disposal, the homestead’s materiality required a particular kind of attention to make sense of it. Too flimsy and disarticulated to hold up to the blunt discernment exercised by the
conservation professionals, the objects solicited a different kind of practice. The work I did took place in the realm of the abject and the devalued, with materiality that lay, as Victor Buchli comments, ‘beyond the constitutive outsides of social reality’. As I worked on the homestead’s ragged things, they worked on me. They forced me to consider how things come to matter, both physically and socially. Questions of materiality—worked as they are through various forms of inclusion and exclusion—are inextricably bound up with questions about whose versions of history get the upper hand. In making the decision to attend to the waste things, I made different materialities visible and facilitated an opening up of new subjectivities.

This was not always a pleasant experience. We expel and discard things partly in the interests of maintaining the boundaries of the self. ‘[O]ne is what one does not throw away,’ comments Gay Hawkins. A research practice that fixes attention on marginal things frequently runs up against the urge to reject the objects of its analysis. I remember finding the scroll of brittle paper in the root cellar, netted with thick grey cobwebs. An uneven line of nibbling ran down one edge. I considered tossing the tattered cylinder into the plastic rubbish sack at my elbow, but something stopped me.

---

13 Ibid., 16.
14 Hawkins: 20.
When I unrolled the scroll I first saw a row of choppy, cake-icing waves, and a line that emerged as the edge of a crude battleship. A flotilla of pod-like attachments, labelled ‘torpedo exploders’, clustered along the ship’s hull. Two fat smokestacks churned out Brillo-dense smoke. What caught my attention was not the ship, though, but the place where the ship wasn’t. The nibbling on the edge of the scroll had created a pattern of two symmetrical, scalloped absences that cut through the drawing. I thought about William at work on an invention that would never be built, dreaming naval battles from his land-locked state, eventually stowing his aspirations in the root cellar where the rodents and the insects slowly consumed them. Then, my thoughts shifted to my own creative labour—the boxes I filled, the words I wrote, the captured images. My labour was, in its own way, just as flimsy, my aspirations (eventually) just as vulnerable to the depredations of decay.

The homestead’s things challenged me to accommodate the transience of material forms, but they also forced a (not entirely welcome) confrontation with the transience of my own attempts at ordering and making sense. I had to yield to other ways of ordering and arranging the world. My work became characterised by what Hawkins describes as ‘those responses to waste that unsettle mastery, those intensities that signal not our difference from waste but our profound implications with it’. ‘To be moved by waste’, she writes, ‘to be disturbed by it, is to be open to our own becoming.’ My implication with the materiality of the place I called my ‘field’ should not be classed as a failure (that could have been avoided had I exhibited proper restraint), but as part of an exchange. I had, paradoxically, destroyed what I most wanted to save, but opened up the possibility of recycling the wasted matter in new constructions of self and subjectivity. ‘In the gap … where things are held in a state denying their wastage’, writes Kevin Hetherington, ‘we can attain a settlement with their remaining value’. Confrontation with the refuse things produced new ways of being in the world.

At the other end of the line, what I’m left with is not the sensation of disorder, but a sense of

---

17 McAllister.
familiarity. 'The interpreting self is itself grafted into the object of study', writes Michael Taussig.21 Any act of interpretation works this reciprocal magic to some extent, establishing an intersubjective relation between researched and researcher.22 Often, these entanglements are viewed as a liability, an obstacle to objective analysis. Clearly, this is not the angle I intend to take in the closing pages of the thesis. As people and things encountered each other at the homestead, they fostered a creative 'mutuality'.23 This mutual relation seemed to carry the seeds of a different kind of approach to the material past.

The homestead now carries on not as preserved historic site, but as something more difficult to describe. Taussig's arboricultural metaphor may apply here as well. The work at the homestead takes up the live, but weathered, material of an older practice and grafted it onto a new rootstock. Or, if you prefer, the work recycles the remainders of a previous mode of existence to create a resource that is valued in the present. This work is not really about preservation (the jars on the shelf in the cellar). It may be more aptly be described as 'place-making'. Biochemical cycles of decomposition and revitalisation occur alongside the conceptual recycling of memories and historical traces. People take up fragments of the past to form new combinations. Rather than keeping things 'in perpetuity', the approach allows for the experience of decay and the possibility of regeneration. It does so, partly, by fostering the kind of intersubjective experience I described above, allowing the biographies of people become tangled up with the biographies of things.

Here's another small story about one such happening.

An ordinary red sandstone boulder lies on the hillside above the homestead. About a hundred thousand years ago, this sandstone chunk broke off from a thick layer of sedimented deposits, which once formed the bottom of an inland sea. Glaciers ground the rough edges off the chunk (as they gouged out deep mountain valleys) and dropped it on the shores of a glacial lake. When the lake burst through its ice dam 10,000 years ago, the small red boulder remained behind, high and dry on a foothill slope above a river valley, slowly weathering. In 1870, a group of surveyors adopted the stone as a corner marker in a grid of boundary lines stretched out over the Montana territory. A sharp tool marked a parallel stack of four horizontal hatchmarks and a

distinct 'X' into the stone's grainy surface. When the Moons walked the borders of their claim, the stone told them they were in the southwest corner of their 160-acre quarter section: a boundary fence arose to hold in grazing sheep and cattle. The fence is now gone, but the stone remains on the hillside, scarred and silent. This ordinary sandstone boulder has the capacity to perform memory in many ways, depending on the resources brought to the encounter. Last summer, I brought a group of children up to this spot on the hill and told them some of the story, as I knew it. One boy insisted on having his picture taken with the stone. There he is, his elbow leaning on the little egg-shaped rock, making a memory that includes the two of them.

Scrap-heap heritage

Although I'm reluctant to draw big conclusions from the work that I performed at the homestead, I do want to reflect on how the practices I developed in the course of this project might relate to a broader field of engagement. Questions of politics and subjectivity work through this thesis in the fine grain of the particular. Sometimes—in Chapter 3's evocation of complex personhood, in the mimetic counter-memory of Chapter 4, in the expansive ecologies of Chapter 5—the political and the subjective converge in productive alignments. I don't make much of these convergences in the individual chapters, but I want to suggest here that the realm where questions of politics meet those of subjectivity is, for lack of a better term, the realm of ethics.

In Chapter 1, I expressed an intention to work from an ethical stance, 'premised on a notion of care for the absent, a making of self through the encounter with its presence, and a concern for
its possible return'. 24 This intention has been working through the thesis in the background, emerging in the narration of countless small decisions about what to save and what to throw away—which are ultimately decisions about what resources remain for making sense of the past in the present. This is not an ethics concerned with moral principles or universal codes of conduct, but a more intimate and relational ethics oriented around, in this instance, the treatment of waste. 25

'Waste is inevitable and it is how we deal with this, what calculations and values we establish to make it meaningful, that is the terrain of ethics,' comment Gay Hawkins and Stephen Meucke. 26 The thesis developed 'a set of practical tactics and cultivations' that afforded opportunities for creative responses to wasted things. 27 This ethics of responsibility embraced things that otherwise would have remained outside our social world, illegible and excluded. 28 The different kinds of memory work solicited the return of the absent in various ways—making sense, making do, and making self through encounters with marginal things.

Sometimes (but certainly not always), the engagement between people and things seemed to open out into a working space where the past, remembered otherwise, prompted critical reflection. In these moments, the memories 'set to work an engagement with history original to every new present'. 29 In refusing to understand and represent the ordinary things as material illustrations of already settled histories, the research also, in an indirect way, unsettled the relations of power and authority that establish those histories. Recall the moments in the thesis when the absent returns to comment on the politics of the present: a rusty fence on a Montana hillside prompts a reflection on the accelerating technologies of war; a swastika on a biscuit box folds time in a commentary on the banality of evil; a picket-fence talks back to a culture of waste and consumption. These are, of course, elliptical, speculative challenges to tradition. They work not from a strategy of direct critique, but rather from a practical one premised on an 'ethos of ethical disorder which ensures

---

24 Hetherington: 171.
25 The emphasis on ethics as an emergent field of encounter allies this practice with the work of recent scholars who focus on the ethical efficacy of 'excess' and 'becoming'. Elizabeth Grosz, "Becoming...An Introduction," in Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Future, ed. Elizabeth Grosz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Alenka Zupancic, Ethics of the Real (London: Verso, 2000).
that no one regime gets the upper hand and the boundaries of social legitimacy can always be challenged. In this practical critique, there appeared an answer to Benjamin’s question: “What are the phenomena rescued from?” The phenomena are rescued, he went on to propose, ‘Not only, and not in the main, from the discredit and neglect into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often by a certain strain in their dissemination, their “enshrinement as heritage”—They are saved through the exhibition of the fissure in them.’

While the ‘exhibition’ of the fissures in the homestead’s materials established points of contact with a politics outside the place’s boundary fences, it also asserted the relevance of the experience that unfolded within those fences. The memory work located politics in the texture of everyday lives, in the heft of a milk bucket and the tissue wrapper of an imported lemon. The disjointed materialities exposed stories not usually included by the rhetorics governing the form in which history can be represented. The narration that works through this thesis asserts the legitimacy of affective, intimate, and corporeal experience—not as a supplement to political and social analysis but as an essential ingredient in it. The method facilitated an appreciation of the fragmented subjectivities and unknowable interior lives of the historical subjects who were linked to the homestead’s abandoned materialities. In this, it moved beyond using these people’s lives as narrative illustration. Instead, it framed the making of meaning as a ‘dialogue and on-going mutual interrogation’ staged between objects and subjects, materials and memories.

Consider, for example, the 1935 motoring map I found in one of the sheds. On the cover, a gentle road winds into spectacular mountain scenery. The text below this reads: ‘Treasure State and Land of Shining Mountains’—the ‘treasure’ referring to the state’s venerable mining industry and the ‘shining mountains’ asserting the glory of the natural features that the mining industry had done (and continues to do) its best to obliterate. Now, this is a straightforward reading of two poles of

30 Buchli, 18. ‘The question begged’, asks Michael Rowlands, ‘is whether “heritage cultures” and their representation are conservative and primarily concerned with the anodyne, the romantic, and with maintaining a sense of closure or whether they can form a practical critique that opens the opportunity of cultural transgression’. Rowlands, 111.
31 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 473.
32 Ibid.
Montana’s troubled identity, but what happens when we invite the Randolph’s to the picnic? Remember the pink napkin, nibbled by mice, with the names of William and Emma and Bonnie written on in ink, the words ‘Nine Mile’ across the bottom? Remember the documents from William’s failed placer mining adventures on the Nine Mile Creek, the ‘black sand catcher’ he designed to sieve out the fine gold from the ‘shining mountains’ he’d blasted with his pneumatic hoses? The image of William and family, picnicking by the banks of Nine Mile Creek, turns the schizophrenic iconography of the motoring map into a subtler commentary on compromise and affection, desire for wealth and appreciation of the environments damaged in the pursuit of it. This is perhaps not the best example of what I am trying to get at, but it touches on the possibility of a materialised historical practice that takes seriously what can happen when we do as William advised on his sketch of the sand catcher and ‘Use your imagination’ [sic] to make connections between disparate things.

The process of remembering I describe in this thesis works through contingent rather than causal relationships, through haphazard alignments more often than deliberate positionings. Some would detect evasion in this approach, an unwillingness to address issues of historical inequality and injustice directly. Although the tactics I explore in the thesis might allow for critical or subversive readings to emerge, this outcome is far from guaranteed. If each person constructs a relationship to the past through idiosyncratic encounters with material and cultural fragments, interpretation may be just as likely to reinforce, rather than destabilise, essentialist historical narratives. And although the homestead (like any place in the American West) grew out of intertwined histories of colonialism, racism, resource exploitation and gender politics, the work I have been doing in this thesis picks up on these histories unevenly. These big critical issues appear in shards of evidence,
unfinished anecdotes, worked through in the microscopic and the singular. My musings about the way the memory work opens up, through circuitous paths, the possibility for personal and social change may seem like a weak defence against those who would have critical work address the important issues head-on.

I want to propose, in way of closing, that the techniques of circumspection and conjecture applied in this thesis do their critical work more subtly, but no less effectively. ‘[M]ateriality... and practices have indirect ways of telling us stories... about power, agency, and history that we could never grasp through more direct form of representation’, suggests Hetherington. The ‘ways of telling’ explored in this thesis produce a situated and specific knowledge. This knowledge works history against the grain in the very fine grains of that history, while insisting that the story can always be told otherwise. For this reason, it is not easy to reduce the outcomes of this research to a set of precepts or conclusive critiques. The work retains an element of ‘irreducible scrappiness’—and finds in that scrappiness the resources for new alignments and interpretations. The method resists the closures that would put in place an authoritative history (even one that repairs the representational omissions committed by previous narratives). It finds, in the gap, a space of ethical

engagement where people and things make and re-make the memories that give meaning to places.  

'Stories about places are makeshift things,' writes Michel de Certeau, 'They are composed of the world's debris'. In this thesis, the world's debris assembles through the prism of a ramshackle homestead. A collection of ragged, seemingly useless things provides the raw material for experimentation with a different kind of interpretive practice. Always dwelling in the space where meaning is being constructed, the analysis works an immanent, rather than explicit, mode of critique. Acts of improvisational reuse mirror and refract a history of creative invention. Forces of decay and disintegration participate in the excavation of natural and human biographies. Worn and worthless things form constellations of potent—if transient—meaning. Encounters with materials lead to a folding of spatiality and temporality, as people and artefacts 'perform' the past. The working and re-working of material exposes in these shards a 'mutable structure of experience', legible only in its rehabilitation. These rites of salvage retrieve what had been forgotten (and give expression to what was never remembered in the first place).

Over the rainbow

In one of the homestead's magazine heaps I found a tattered advertisement torn from the Saturday Evening Post. The illustration shows a fat rainbow arched over a bucolic landscape somewhere in the archetypal American heartland. Fields etched with perfectly straight rows fill the frame and roll up to a low white farmhouse and a red barn and silo. Beyond, the endless green plains of Iowa, or maybe Indiana, stretch to the horizon. The text below this image reads, in bold: 'Research Problems are like Rainbows'. Smaller print below this statement explains 'You never know what you're going to find at the end of a research problem. A pot of gold... a new idea... or nothing at all'. The ad goes on to congratulate Gulf's laboratory scientists for their research and development of a new Gulfpride motor oil.

40 Latham; Rose.
Research Problems are like Rainbows

You never know what you're going to find at the end of a research problem. A pot of gold... a new idea... or nothing at all.

Some time ago, for example, the Gulf laboratories started work on a turbine oil problem. Nobody dreamed that in solving it—and with it one of America's war production problems—there would also be solved the problem of creating a better oil for automobiles.

Yet that was what came of it. A way to better even Gulfpride Oil—an oil that can do much to relieve your worries about excessive engine wear.

For the Gulf laboratories found new steps to add to Gulf's famous Alchlor process.

These steps do important things for Gulfpride... make it last longer... carry greater loads... more resistant to heat and oxygen... more resistant to sludging—truly remarkable things when you realize that Gulfpride was already known to scientist and driver alike as 'The World's Finest Motor Oil.'

You can expect this new oil to give you safer lubrication, lower oil consumption, a cleaner motor, less carbon, and greater protection for piston rings and bearings.

We are glad this new Gulfpride is available at a time when a better motor oil means so much.

You can expect this new oil to give you safer lubrication, lower oil consumption, a cleaner motor, less carbon, and greater protection for piston rings and bearings.

We are glad this new Gulfpride is available at a time when a better motor oil means so much.

I tacked this ad up on the wall in my workroom at the homestead, and often looked at it ruefully when my research felt particularly rainbow-like. Sometimes I could see the outline of 'a new idea', and more often than I should probably admit I felt the sting of the 'nothing at all'. But I came to realise one thing the Gulfpride advertisers failed to mention about rainbows, and about research problems. The thing is, rainbows don’t exist unless a person is there to see them. The illusion we call a rainbow is created by the alignment of a seeing eye with sun and water and space. It is an
effect, not an entity on its own, and that is why the end of the rainbow always seems to recede as
the seer tries to draw closer to it.

So, research problems are like rainbows, if only because they, too, insist on rematerialising
again and again (just over the next field...) as the researcher tries to get closer to the end of them.
The end to my own research problem is even now glimmering hazily, alluringly, in the middle
distance. It won't let me get too close, but maybe it will let me say a few things to put this project to
rest. The work I carried out at the homestead was only a beginning. Mi-won Kwon articulates what
remains to be done well, I think, when she calls for cultural practices that 'sustain the cultural and
historical specificity of a place (and self)’ without creating the place as either a 'simulacral pacifier
[or] a wilful invention’. She asks for methods that have the capacity and the sensitivity to
understand 'seeming oppositions as sustaining relations'.43 The scrappiness that I've been
celebrating in this thesis illustrates what this cultural work might look like on the ground, and in the
overlooked sheds and cellars of one derelict Montana farm.

43 Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT
Press, 2002), 166.
After-image

Fieldnotes, 25 April 2002

Writing about seeing, and photography. What is happening? I wander into a shed, or pull out an old drawer. Am confronted by disorder, decay, indistinct detail. My reaction? Equal parts aversion (the dust, the mould, the mouse faeces, the crumbling, careless mass of it all) and fascination (the glint of steel, a certain arrangement of text and image, the inadvertent placement suggesting a coded meaning). But the aversion is more powerful, usually, and defaults me to a rote exploration, detached, doubtful. Not quite able to trust, or understand, my impulse... I document the moment with a photograph, trusting that something is there to see even if I am unable to identify it in the moment, hedging against the [next] moment when the evidence will be gone, dis-integrated, lost.

And when the photos arrive back from the developer, then, I have the moment of recognition. The lens snaps into place. I've placed the distance between the object and myself and so turned it into the aim of my analysis. Captured it as surely as a butterfly on a board. The image fixed, collected... The object, that had been material and tangible, caught up in cycles of decay and appropriation, is now inert...

But the symbolic aspect of the image is now activated, animated by the frame that sets it apart from its context. On location, the white noise of now (the danger of the sagging roof, the crumbling bodies of insects, the sheer mass of insignificance, the paralyzing clutter) renders the image... inaccessible, invisible except in an oblique glance. The camera clears away the distracting mess and presents the image as distillation, as allegory, open to any reading I want to place on it...

The photos hold something that wasn't present in the moment of capture—a retrospective haunting that is stronger because the documented object has been destroyed, the newspapers no longer on those walls, the drawers emptied. They are gone, into the flat freedoms of their representations....

When I take any photo, it is like that moment in the pitch-black root cellar, blind, but trusting the flash to illuminate the structure that I stand within. The profane illumination takes place outside me. This is important. I can access the interesting bits only if they are abstracted, dissected, safe.... The persistent threats—bantaverus, head injuries—make it impossible to perceive what I am seeing. I can only do that once the threat has been removed. The camera becomes a research tool whose role is not to document, but to disclose.

This passage, written at the end of my first month of fieldwork, touches on some of the tensions and paradoxes that developed around the use of photography in my research. The camera (initially, a 35mm Olympus; later, a digital Canon) became a critical instrument in my evolving methodology, though I took it up for many different reasons and applied it towards various ends.

As the fieldnote excerpt suggests, I used photography to create a safe working space where I could examine an object without the threat of noxious inhalation or accidental injury. I took photos to record arrangements of matter soon to be destroyed by my own interventions, or by the work of
others. I took photos to record a particular texture, a cast of light, a striking juxtaposition or an expressive detail. I photographed the performance of specific events, encounters, or tasks. Documentary impulses (when I desperately wanted to maintain the fiction that I could capture something in a state untouched by my presence) balanced with deliberate manipulations (the list in the tree, the carefully arranged boxes of found treasures).

On reflection, I realise that I used photography to understand the way the homestead’s materiality affected me, as much as to record its forms and shapes. What ended up captured on the slick prints and in the digital files of my computer is a chronicle of my curiosity (though I soon came to realise that I couldn’t count on the photographs to perform predictably or consistently). Sometimes the camera would see things that I hadn’t noticed; sometimes it neutralised the effect that I had tried to capture. Sometimes the finished images ‘objectified’ the ragged things and granted them a presence and a potency that seemed to be lacking in three dimensions; sometimes the object refused translation into pixels and print, and the resulting images had a hollowness at their centre. In the end, photography worked as another form of ‘memory-making’, dogged by the same omissions, absences, fabrications and inventions that appeared in the application of the other tactics.
The ghosts of the homestead’s other visualities haunted my camera work and influenced my ways of seeing the place. In the drifts of magazines and books and clippings, a residue of popular visual culture extended from the late nineteenth century into the end of the twentieth, and through a global field of representation. The excess of imagery in these found sources challenged me to find a way of acknowledging it in the thesis. In the end, I re-imaged many of these photographic reproductions in my own photos, insinuating myself into a shuttling process that worked from object to printed image (the actual Ford Model T to the picture of the Ford Model T), and again from object (the printed ‘Ford Pictorial’ advertising circular, a physical artefact of cheap newsprint and smudgy ink) to image (the digital reproduction of the flyer, stored in my computer’s hard drive).

The attic’s antique camera and the bizarre ‘whatzit’ movie camera gestured towards the Randolphs’ own technologies for self-documentation, though none of their family photos remained at the homestead for me to find. I found only three photographic prints in the course of my excavations: a damp-eaten portrait of a man named Fred; a faded image of someone identified as ‘Effie’s boy’; and a school portrait from a Missouri primary school. Off site, Shirley Verworn and Ione Randolph King opened their family photo albums to me, but the salvage principle I’ve been working from prevents me from including those photos in the thesis. That said, I carried with me the imprint of these intimate snapshots—William’s gaunt frame on a horse next to a stand of summer corn; a small boy standing on a bridge over the gully with his dog; a family group on a bleak late winter day in the 1940s, the background filled by patchy snowmelt, bare trees, a scatter of broken things. Contemporary photographers introduced another layer of complexity to the homestead’s visual tradition, as they wandered about stalking the perfect combination of ruin and relic, light and legend. (Certain structures and details appeared again and again in these images, as if the photographers were working from the same sourcebook on the aesthetics of nostalgia and decay). I became aware of my own deliberate resistance to a certain framing of the homestead, even as I detected strains of this aesthetic in my own production.

I took over 800 photographs in the course of the fieldwork. For the most part, these photos were not taken with an eye to how they would appear on the printed page. The process of producing them, was, as I have indicated, oriented toward a whole range of different impulses, only
some of which had anything to do with their eventual reproduction. When I began to write the
thesis in England, the archive of photos (stored in a giant ring binder and in a series of folders on
my computer) became a frequent reference point. Eventually, I began to process and insert into the
text a selection of images that seemed to fit in context, in relation to emerging arguments and
descriptions. If I regret anything, it is that the images that appear in the thesis fail to adequately
capture the messiness and disorder of the place and its things. I didn’t realise until it was too late
that my eye had gravitated toward arrangements of matter that seemed to express some kind of
internal coherence. Even the degraded and disagreeable things have a peculiarly idealised
appearance in these images, though I’m not sure how I could have had it be otherwise.

The photos do not appear in the thesis as hard evidence, although they do bring pieces of
the field back for examination. They are part of a research practice that replaces documentary
certainties with a more erratic and creative notion of how visual material might be used (and
produced) in social science research. I present the photos without the textual scaffolding (captions,
lists) that would naturalise them into the thesis as ‘illustrations’. The images engage in a different
kind of conversation with the text. Sometimes the text prompts a particular image; sometimes the
image prompts the text; sometimes they miss each other altogether. The photos leap ahead and lag
behind, circle around and show up absences in the narration that accompanies them. At times, the
photos may make an ‘argument’ which contradicts or complicates the one bumping along on the
written page. In other moments, the photos communicate a sensation of tactile and embodied
experience that is next to impossible to convey verbally. I hope, finally, that the relation between
text and image expresses something of the disjointed materiality it arose from. I’m asking these
photos to do a particular kind of academic and aesthetic work for me—affirming the points I have
been making about scrappy objects and their dispersed memories. Whether or not they photos
achieve this is, of course, not entirely in my hands, and has much to do with the resources that the
reader brings to bear on the project.

2 Michael Pryke, "The White Noise of Capitalism: Audio and Visual Montage and Sensing Economic
Change," Cultural Geographies 9 (2002); Christopher Tilley, Sue Hamilton, and Barbara Bender, "Art and the
3 Stephen Harrison, Steve Pile, and Nigel Thrift, eds., Patterned Ground: Entanglements of Nature and Culture
4 Gillian Rose, "Practising Photography: An Archive, a Study, Some Photographs, and a Researcher." Journal
of Historical Geography 25 (2000).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


_________. "Constructing 'the Geographical Archive'." *Area* 34, no. 3 (2002): 303-311.


APPENDIX A
Inventory

The attached CD contains the inventory for the Moon-Randolph Homestead on-site collection (please see the discussion in Chapter 2 for background on the assembly of this resource). The disk contents include separate inventory files for (1) archival material (original documents and correspondence); (2) artefacts; (3) published print material; and, (4) loose objects and documents that remain outside the storage system. The files should be opened in Microsoft Excel. Within the Excel worksheets, each item is entered on a separate line, with the following information: item description, provenance, condition, storage location, and catalogue date. A few strategies for exploring this inventory might include:

a. **Browsing:** Simply use the right-hand scroll bar to move up and down along the list.

b. **Searching:** Use the Edit/Find function to enter names for items or topics of interest, or for specific items that appear in the text.

c. **Exploring:** Again, use the Edit/Find function, but this time enter the names of particular buildings or locations.