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# OBSERVED DECAY: TELLING STORIES WITH MUTABLE THINGS

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## **Abstract**

The degradation of cultural artefacts is usually understood in a purely negative vein: the erosion of physical integrity is associated with a parallel loss of cultural information. This article asks if it is possible to adopt an interpretive approach in which entropic processes of decomposition and decay, though implicated in the destruction of cultural memory traces on one register, contribute to the recovery of memory on another register. The article tracks the entanglement of cultural and natural histories through the residual material culture of a derelict homestead in Montana. In conclusion, the article suggests that deposits of degraded material, though inappropriate for recovery in conventional conservation strategies, may be understood through the application of a collaborative interpretive ethic, allowing other-than-human agencies to participate in the telling of stories about particular places.

**Key Words** ◆ entropy ◆ heritage ◆ memory ◆ Montana ◆ waste

If you are squeamish  
do not poke among the beach rubble

Sappho (Barnard, 1958)

## INTRODUCTION

The ideas in this article germinated at a derelict homestead in Montana where I spent several years poking about in a scrambled deposit of domestic and agricultural rubble. My excavations performed an ad hoc

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FIGURE 1 The 'Home Comfort' cookstove holds its own against a collapsing wall in the homestead kitchen.

*All photographs by Caitlin DeSilvey*

archaeology of the recent past in a place not yet old enough to be interesting to (most) archaeologists (though see Buchli and Lucas, 2001) and too marginal and dilapidated to be interesting to historic preservationists. The farm, settled with a homestead claim in 1889, lay a few miles north of the city of Missoula, tucked into a swale in the bare foothills of the Rocky Mountains. For most of the 20th century, the Randolph family ran a market garden and subsistence operation on the site, but by the 1990s these days of productivity were long past. The youngest son in the family died in 1995, leaving behind a complex of ramshackle sheds and dwellings crammed with the debris of decades (Figure 1). I

came along in 1997 and began to work with the site's residual material culture, first as a volunteer curator and later as a research student working towards a doctoral degree in cultural geography.

As I worked in the homestead's derelict structures, I often came upon deposits of ambiguous matter – aptly described by Georges Bataille as the 'unstable, fetid and lukewarm substances where life ferments ignobly' (1993: 81). Maggots seethed in tin washtubs full 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. Rodents, moulds, insects

and other organisms, long accustomed to being left alone, had colonized the excess matter. Packrat middens crowded attic corners with pyramids of shredded text and stolen spoons. Hoardings deposited by animals and humans mingled indistinguishably. I am not particularly squeamish, and I did poke, but the edge of revulsion was never far away. I worked close against the margin where the 'procreative power of decay' sparks simultaneous – and contradictory – sensations of repugnance and attraction (Bataille, 1993). In my early excavations, the degraded material presented a problem that I could barely articulate, let alone resolve.

In her characterization of waste as a by-product of the creation of order, Mary Douglas comments on the threat posed by things that have been incompletely absorbed into the category of waste. 'Rejected bits and pieces' which are recognizably 'out of place', she observes, still have some identity because they can be traced back to their origins (1966: 160). 'This is the stage at which they are dangerous', Douglas writes, 'their half-identity still clings to them and the clarity of the scene in which they obtrude is impaired by their presence' (1966). Such obtrusions of clarity were common in my encounters with the homestead's artefacts. A bundle of paper furred with mould; a tangle of stained fabric and desiccated mouse carcasses; musty locks of human hair; a pair of badger paws tacked above a door lintel; tin cans cloaked with rust and cobwebs (Figure 2) – these things were caught up in the processes of 'pulverising, dissolving, and rotting' which would eventually render them unrecognizable (Douglas, 1966). Their disposal, however, remained unfinished (Hetherington, 2004).

At base, the ideas in this article arose from my uncertainty about which items to salvage from this deposit of co-mingled matter. In ruins, Tim Edensor comments, 'processes of decay and the obscure agencies of intrusive humans and non-humans transform the familiar material world, changing the form and texture of objects, eroding their assigned functions and meanings, and blurring the boundaries between things' (Edensor, 2005b: 318). As the curator of the site, I had responsibility for recovering items of value from this inauspicious mess so they could be enlisted for projects of cultural remembrance. 'It is unpleasant to poke about in the refuse to try to recover anything, for this revives identity', Douglas observes – sounding curiously like Sappho (1966: 160). Such slippery materials produce 'ambiguous perceptions' that trouble the order of things (1966).

Conventional strategies for conservation and heritage preservation neutralize these ambiguous perceptions through a set of value judgements that render materials into distinct categories of 'artefact' and 'waste'. In this place, however, such an approach would have led to the disposal of all but the most durable items.<sup>1</sup> The homestead's materiality required a particular kind of attention to make sense of it, one that attempted not to defuse sensations of ambiguity and aversion, but to work with them.



FIGURE 2 Coffee cans collect leaf-fall on a shelf in a collapsing shed.

I begin the article with a discussion of the way certain deposits of material open up breaches in the categories we use to order the world and to structure our attempts at remembering the past. A section on memory work and heritage follows, with a proposal for a mode of remembrance that might accommodate these shifty materialities and yield to the collaborative energies of other agencies. I continue with a rumination on how such approaches trouble the authority of the curator, and move on to an experiment in collaborative 'synchronic handiwork'. The article is primarily concerned with problems of interpretation – how can we think about these things, and how do we work with them without eliding their ambiguity? 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 (1987: 151). The threshold of discomfort and aversion, Sloterdijk suggests, can also be a threshold to other ways of knowing.

## NESTING

I made a curious discovery one morning while I picked away at the debris in the homestead's old creamery shed – which had long ago been

given over as storage for miscellaneous matter. Against the shed's back wall, under a long bench behind a heap of baling twine and feed sacks, sat a dingy wooden box, roughly two feet wide by four feet long. I pulled off a covering piece of corrugated tin to disclose a greyish mass of fibre, bits of woody material, seeds and plum pits filling the chest up to the rim. But then I noticed a leather book cover, and another. A stack of battered volumes nestled in among the litter. Leaning closer, I saw that scraps of torn paper made up part of the box's grey matter. I picked out a few legible pieces: 'shadowed', 'show', 'here', 'start', 'Christ'. The words mingled with mouse droppings, cottony fluff, and leaf spines (and the odd mouse skeleton). Tiny gnaw marks showed along the spines of the books, half-moons of stolen print. I opened one mottled text, *Bulwer's Work*, to a chapter on 'The Last Days of Pompeii' and read a purple passage about the inhabitants of that ill-fated town.

*An Encyclopaedia of Practical Information* occupied pride of place in the top centre of the box. The chunky reference text (copyright 1888) seemed to be intact, save for a small borehole 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'. The borehole tracked my progress through the inches of brittle paper. 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 pages disappeared into the litter of seeds and scraps, the single hole still tunnelling down into the unknown.

Faced with a decision about what to do with this curious mess, I balked. The curator in me said I should just pull the remaining books out of the box, brush off the worst of the offending matter, and display them to the public as a damaged but interesting record of obsolete knowledge. Another instinct told me to leave the mice to their own devices and write off the contents of the box as lost to rodent infestation. I could understand the mess as the residue of a system of human memory storage, or I could see an impressive display of animal adaptation to available resources. It was difficult to hold both of these interpretations in my head at once, though. I had stumbled on a rearrangement of matter that mixed up the categories I used to understand the world. It presented itself as a problem to be solved with action – putting things in their place. But what I found myself wanting to do most, after I recovered from my initial surprise, was to take what was there and think about how it got there. I wanted to follow the invisible bookworm into the encyclopaedia.

## OBJECT AS PROCESS

In the box-nest, I had come up against a moment of ambiguous perception in which my interest was torn between two apparently contradictory interpretive options. To borrow a turn of phrase from environmental archaeology, I found myself with a decision to make about whether I was looking at an *artefact* – a relic of human manipulation of the material world – or an *ecofact* – a relic of other-than-human engagements with matter, climate, weather, and biology (Jones, 2005: 85). Cultural matter had taken on an explicitly ecological function. To see what was happening required a kind of double vision, attuned to uncertain resonances and ambivalent taxonomies (Figure 3). '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' (Solnit, 1999: 91).

If you're only attuned to see the wineglass – the evidence of explicitly human activity – then the onset of decay and entropic intervention may look only like destruction, an erasure of memory and history. Paying attention to one aspect of the object's existence deflects attention from another. But I want to argue in this article that if we can hold the wineglass and the kiss in mind concurrently, decay reveals itself not (only) as erasure but as a process that can be generative of a different kind of knowledge. The book-box-nest required an interpretive frame that would let its contents maintain simultaneous identities as books *and* as stores of raw material for rodent homemaking. Michael Taussig touches on a

FIGURE 3 An accidental collage of seeds and text forms on the wall of a dismantled cabin.



similar theme 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, 2003: 15–16). Taussig acknowledges how difficult it can be to encounter amalgamated deposits of cultural and biological memory in these places: 'What you have to do is hold contrary states in mind and allow the miasma to exude', he writes (2003: 16).

Taussig's advice seems promising, but how exactly do we go about letting the miasma exude? This is not a particularly easy thing to do, especially when curatorial work assumes a certain responsibility for stabilizing things in frames of reference that make them accessible to those who come along afterwards. I soon came to realize, however, that the drive towards stabilizing the thing was part of the problem.

In the past few decades, theoretical approaches that stabilize the identity of a thing in its fixed form have given way to more complex notions of identity as a mutable and living process (Appadurai, 1986; Buchli, 2002; Thomas, 1991). As Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld recently observed in a special issue of this journal, however, there remains in museum and material culture studies a pervasive identification between the social significance of an artefact and its physical permanence (2004: 246). Colloredo-Mansfeld and other authors show how 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 (2004: 250). Objects generate social effects not just in their preservation and persistence, but in their destruction and disposal (Hansen, 2003; Hetherington, 2004; Lucas, 2002; Van der Hoorn, 2003). 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.

This is also true of objects transformed or disfigured by ecological processes of disintegration and regeneration. These things have social lives, but they have biological and chemical lives as well, which may only become perceptible when the things begin to drop out of social circulation (Edensor, 2005a: 100). The disarticulation of the object may lead to the articulation of other histories, and other geographies. An approach that understands the artefact as a process, rather than a stable entity with a durable physical form, is perhaps able to address some of the more ambiguous aspects of material presence (and disappearance). The book-box-nest is neither *artefact* or *ecofact*, but both – a dynamic entity that is entangled in both cultural and natural processes, part of an 'admixture of waste and life, of decadence and vitality' (Neville and Villeneuve, 2002: 2). Of course, in order to think this way it's necessary to defer the urge to 'save' the artefact. Interpretation requires letting the





FIGURE 4 A tattered quilt, pieces of it stolen to line the nests of resident rodents.

process run, and watching what happens in the going. Though this might seem wilfully destructive to those who locate the memorial potency of the object in its unchanging physical form, I want to suggest that a different kind of remembrance becomes possible in this kind of work.

In a broader sense, I want to engage with the question: 'What are the consequences of seeing certain orderings and not others?' (Harrison et al., 2004: 16). What difference does it make to refuse to discard objects that are mired in advanced states of decay? What kinds of alternative orderings become accessible when interpretation tries to scrutinize things on their way to becoming something else? Others have drawn political, economic, and aesthetic insights from engage-

ments with degraded and fragmented things (Benjamin, 1999; Edensor, 2005a; Hawkins and Muecke, 2003). Although these themes weave through the fringes of the analysis I put forth here, the article is not directly concerned with this body of work. I turn, instead, to a discussion of how the homestead's mutable artefacts inhabit the 'blurred terrain where nature and culture are not so easily (as if they ever were) distinguished and dichotomised' (Harrison et al., 2004: 9). It is here, where what we call 'human' unravels into what we call 'other', that the ambiguous perceptions seem to lie most thickly, and promise most fully (Figure 4).

### MATRIX OF MEMORY

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' (2000: 311). In my dictionary, the ninth (and final) definition for the word 'memory' reads, 'the ability of a material to return to a former state after a constraint has been removed' (Collins English Dictionary, 1991 edition). The matter that makes up the homestead's structures and features exhibits just this kind of tracking backward, as well as a dynamic

evolution into other states. Human labour introduced temporary arrangements – clear window glass, milled lumber, tempered fence wire. But these arrangements are unstable. Century-old glass develops cloudy irregularities in its gradual recrystallization. Faded scraps of newspaper mingle with the husks of fallen leaves. Lichen grows on a standing building, a symbiotic association of fungus and algae breaking down milled clapboards to make them available for recycling into new saplings. A lump of soft coal, pulled from the nearby mine 70 years ago, recalls the organic matter of a 25 million year-old forest. The homestead, like the abandoned Welsh farms described by Michael Shanks and Mike Pearson, is a place where ‘the very processes of the archaeological are apparent: mouldering, rotting, disintegrating, decomposing, putrefying, falling to pieces’ (Pearson and Shanks, 2001: 158). The formation processes that mould the archaeological record are here just getting under way.

It is exactly these processes of mouldering and disintegration that most conservation practices work to forestall. In conventional terms, in order for the object to function as a bearer of cultural memory it must be held in perpetuity in a state of protected stasis. Acts of counting, sorting, stacking, storing and inventory convert things from the category of ‘stuff’ to the status of museum object, and, as a curator at one Montana heritage site commented to me, ‘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’. Conservation technologies slow or halt physical decay, while interpretive strategies present the objects as elements of a static, unchanging past. Ephemeral things, decontextualized and catalogued, acquire a ‘socially produced durability’ in carefully monitored environments (Buchli, 2002: 15). Objects are kept in climate-controlled, rodent-proofed storage areas. Special paint protects artefacts from damaging ultraviolet rays; chest freezers decontaminate cushions and clothing of any lingering moulds and microbes. ‘Arrested decay’ – the maintenance policy applied to buildings to uphold their structural integrity yet preserve their ruined appearance – also works at the scale of individual objects. Most places designed to preserve ‘the past’ take great pains to ensure that the physical and biological processes that underlie that past have been neutralized (DeLyser, 1999). 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 – an incremental forgetting. But the state of affairs is, of course, more complicated than it appears to be. Strategies to arrest decay always destroy some cultural traces, even as they preserve others. And decay itself may clear a path for certain kinds of remembrance despite its (because of its?) destructive energies.

A thicket of box elder trees crowds the fenceline at the bottom of the homestead’s decadent orchard. Given their girth and height, the trees



FIGURE 5 The handle of the grain binder protrudes from a tree trunk.

appear to have seeded within the last half-century. Long before then, the area along the fence accumulated an assortment of farm implements and stock-piled 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 (Figure 5). The hybrid tree-machine works away at a perennial chore, binding iron and cellulose, mineral and vegetable. The binder is too broken down and biodegraded for recuperation in a conventional heritage strategy. If you start to think about the decay of the binder in another way, however, it is possible to see the ongoing intervention of the trees and the soil as productive of other resources for recalling the past in this place. An example from far afield might help explain what I mean by this.

Suzanne Küchler's work in Papua New Guinea has documented the construction of *malanggan*, monuments to the dead. Mourners construct these assemblages of wood or woven vines and decorate the surface with carvings of animals, birds, shells, and human figures. The perishable monument is placed over a human grave as a marker. 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 fertilize gardens. Küchler describes how this vital memorial tradition turns 'the finality of death to a process of eternal return' (Küchler, 1999: 57). The mode of

remembrance practised in the *malaggan* 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' (Kuchler, 1999: 62).

In her work, Kuchler emphasizes 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 revitalization. Kuchler (drawing on Walter Benjamin) 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' (Kuchler, 1999: 63). 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 – accommodating simultaneous resonances of death and rebirth, loss and renewal.

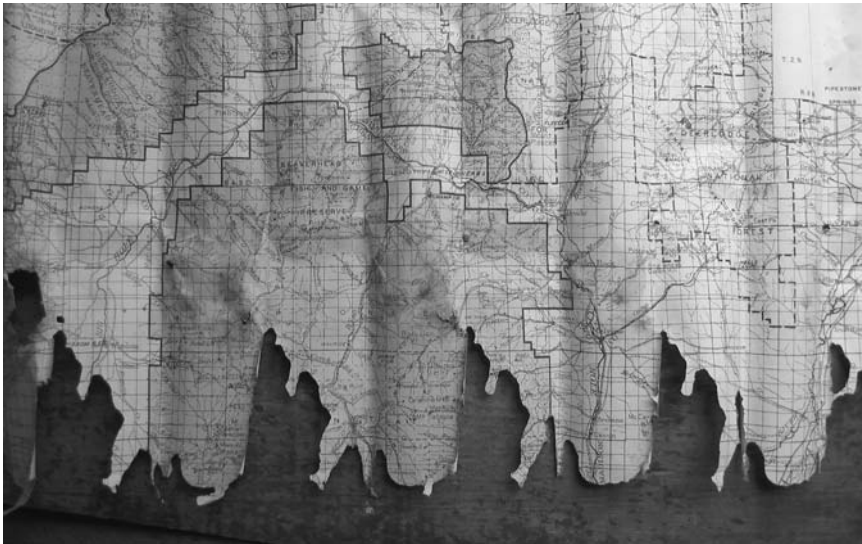
I wonder if it is possible to approach the grain binder as a *malaggan* of the American West, which, too, releases its meaning in decay. An artefact of technological innovation sinks into the dark loam under the box elder trees and recalls its origins in veins of ore under the dark earth. The ruined machine sparks reflections on once robust economies, the changing markets and agricultural consolidations that precipitated the transformation of the western landscape (and the gradual obsolescence of diversified farms like the homestead). Raw material returns to the earth or is seized into the lignin and cellulose of a tree – the tree itself an import from another part of the continent, brought to the West to domesticate unfamiliar places. Now, the weedy trees signal the inexorable 'rewilding' of places that are left to their own ecological devices (Cronon, 2003; Feldman, 2004). These suggestive interpretive resources would not be available if the binder were sawed from the tree, repaired and polished, and set alongside other mechanical agricultural dinosaurs (such an action is probably impossible, at any rate, and would lead to the destruction of both the tree and the implement). The binder suggests a mode of remembrance that is erratic and ephemeral – twined around the past and reaching imperceptibly into what has yet to come. In a sense, the trees participate in the production of cultural memory as 'an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continually modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future' (Bal et al., 1999: vii). Memory, in this sense, is based on chance and imagination as much as evidence and explanation; the forgetting brought on by decay allows for a different form of recollection. Such recollection fosters an acknowledgement of agencies usually excluded from the work of interpretation.

## OTHER EDITING

The farm's root cellar – a cavernous space with crumbling earth walls and a pervasive scent of sour rot – contained several maps in its dim corners and crates, each one spectacularly degraded in its own way. One excavation turned up a US 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 map's gridded territory (Figure 6). 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. The forests in the physical territory depicted by the disfigured paper map suffered from decades of poor management and fire suppression, which made them vulnerable to the depredations of other organisms. Over the last few decades, an infestation of destructive bark beetles has killed many of the trees represented by the map's green patches. The destruction on the root cellar's map can be read as a metonym for the destruction of the surrounding forest. The *disarticulation* of a cultural artefact leads to the articulation of other histories about invertebrate biographies and appetites. In this speculative allegorical example, 'objects have to fall into desuetude at one level in order to come more fully into their own at another' (Gross, 2002: 36).

Other documents showed equally impressive evidence of insect and rodent editing. In their degraded condition, these documents carried an

FIGURE 6 The forest map with the insect-eaten fringe.



unusual charge. I came up against an absence in the record, but an absence that seemed to carve out a window in the wall that usually keeps cultural analysis separate from the 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 draws part of its force from absence and incompleteness (Küchler, 1999: 59). Christopher Woodward (2002), in his observation of the creative resources that people generate when confronted with ruins and remnants, identifies a sympathetic association between structural incompleteness and imaginative invention. Degraded artefacts can contribute to alternative interpretive possibilities even as they 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 curation.

Miles Ogborn, in a recent essay on the ecology of archives, comments on how archives 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 (2004). The elements that make up the archive are open to breaches and interventions – from heat, light, moisture, mould, insects, rodents. Ogborn writes, 'The storehouses 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' (Ogborn, 2004: 240). The 'nature of cultural memory' becomes apparent in the gradual consumption of evidence and images.

I found one of my favourite examples of these cultural ecologies at work in a battered copy of *National Geographic* magazine, which had been stored with others of its kind in a set of cranberry crate shelves in the farmhouse kitchen. In the 40-year interval between human habitation of the dwelling and my intervention hungry moulds and rodents consumed the glossy pages. This particular copy peeled apart reluctantly, to reveal a patchy scene brushed with delicate pink. The mould had eaten away an image of a mountain town to expose a few bars of music, an area of green, shards of unintelligible text. There was a curious loveliness to the transformed scene – mountains and music and mould in a montage of indeterminate effect (Figure 7). The cultural spore of mass printed matter was caught up in the fungal ecologies of decay, its authority an impartial documentation of a world 'out there' undermined by the microscopic imperatives of a world 'in here'. These were the kinds of knowledges produced as other-than-human influences peeled back layers of natural and social history sedimented in the homestead's fragmentary materials.



FIGURE 7 *National Geographic* landscapes altered by moulds and age.

## CO-HABITATION

There was another register in which the homestead's entangled artefacts worked to remember the past in place in unfamiliar ways. The shacks and sheds at the site were full of collections of miscellaneous material: sacks stuffed with feathers and leaves, bushel baskets of wool and fibre, neat stacks of twigs, jars of seed and sand. It was not always clear to me how these gatherings of materials were assembled. The tidy collections troubled the distinction I tried to draw between animal and human labour. The homestead's tack shed contained a few tin cans packed with fruit stones – rough pits from the wild plums that grow in the gully and the hard seeds of the orchard pie cherries. Each of the stones was neatly scraped down to the woody centre, and marked with a tidy chewed hole through which

an animal had extracted the edible core. In the farmhouse pantry, I found dozens of jars of saved garden seeds that were linked into a similar 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 postmarked envelope full of flower seeds, and a twist of catalogue paper around a handful of white snail shells (Figure 8). Nearby a pillowcase hung from a nail, the bottom eaten through to let out a slow leak of feathers.

An odd affinity seemed to hang over these animal accumulations; intertwined memories of seasonal harvest and hoarding seeped out of the jars and tins and bins. As I worked along these lines, the human activity that went into constructing the homestead began to look like just another layer of habitation. I developed an appreciation for how other organisms draw in the raw material of their world and animate it through



FIGURE 8 Collections of seeds and shells.

their modifications – and an altered perspective on the material practices of human dwelling (Hinchliffe, 2003; Ingold, 2000; Lorimer, in press). If the boundary of the organism is 'a process that continually redefines what is considered living and non-living' (Harrison et al., 2004: 34), this place presented a curious record of several different species of extended organisms. The memory in these accretions of matter spoke to decades of co-habitation, of entangled lives and habits. People inhabit places with books and tools and clothes; mice inhabit places with pits and leaves and bones, and the matter people leave behind.

The finest grain of the (elusive) boundary between animal and human habitation lay in the dust. As one of my first curatorial acts at the homestead, I sorted the contents of the long-abandoned kitchen junk drawers. After I had pulled out the household objects and set them aside, a layer of minuscule detritus lay on the wooden bottom slats. I identified bits of mouse droppings, rubber shreds, wood splinters, paper, lint, wire, insect wings, plant stems, seeds, human hairs. An even 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 had reached the base level of materiality, the place where human artefacts blended imperceptibly into mass of worldly matter (Edensor, 2005a: 122). As Phil Dunham points out, encounters with dust raise questions about 'what (if anything) is consistent or whole about our bodies, and where (and indeed whether) a line can meaningfully be drawn between the human and nonhuman worlds' (Dunham, 2004: 100). These encounters, though disagreeable, also served as a powerful reminder of my own entangling with these borderline materials and their active ecologies.



My early decision to let the dust and the detritus into my interpretive frame was not without its risks. As I began to allow myself to yield to these messy remains (McAllister, 2001), I realized 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. '[E]xpelling and discarding is more than biological necessity – it is fundamental to the ordering of the self', comment Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke (2003: xii). In choosing not to discard materials that would, in other circumstances, have been quickly consigned to the rubbish bin, I also opened myself up to influences that unsettled my sense of curatorial authority and allowed the material to 'act back' on me in unexpected ways (Buchli and Lucas, 2001: 5). With the dissolution of standards of value and significance, the sheer excess of eligible material mocked my attempts at recovery and rationalization. Sometimes I found myself pushing back against the chaos to assert some kind of (usually ineffectual) order. But I also experimented a bit with strategies that took the forces of decay on as allies, rather than adversaries.

#### COLLABORATION: SYNCHRONIC HANDIWORK

One day I came across an over-stuffed bushel basket in the homestead's harness shed. I pulled out the top layer of stained clothes to disclose a stew of paper, fabric, and animal leavings. I tipped the whole thing on the grass, where I could see scraps of printed matter mixed in with a mass of pits and seeds, woolly fibre and feathers, long johns and holey socks, a 1928 licence plate and a few delicate mouse spines. I had come across similarly scrambled deposits countless times in my excavations, and I usually gave in to the impulse to discard or burn all but the most discrete items (only the licence plate, in this case). This time, however, something about the mess drew me in, and I began to pick out the shards of text from the other litter (Figure 9).

Later, I took some liberties and drafted a poem from the fragments:

the camera	cardboard box
may	on the wall
record	behind a picture
odd	parts will
invented	have a
museums	numerous
placed at	synchronic
glare horizon	handiwork
your service	that of
makes	invention in
value	minimum
almost anywhere	delight

I like to think that the mice and I share authorship for this work - with some credit due as well to the authors of the articles in the shredded magazines (which I have tentatively identified as an amalgam of *Popular Mechanics* and Seventh Day Adventist religious tracts). I suppose I should also mention 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

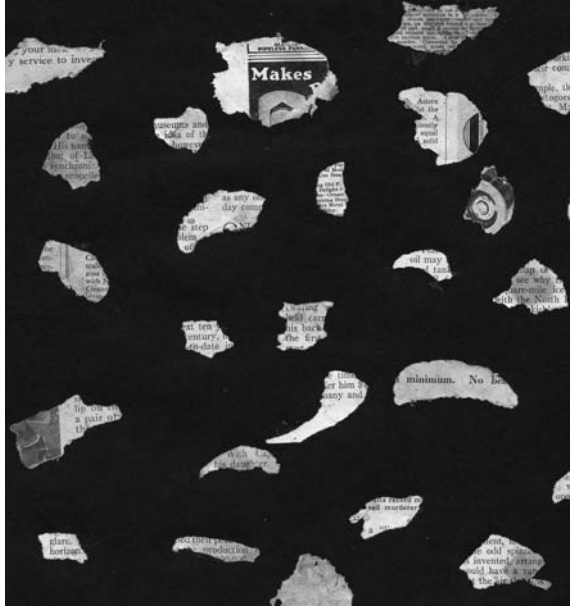


FIGURE 9 Raw material from the bushel basket.

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 (Tzara, 1992: 39). The poem, perhaps, says more about my intervention in the homestead's sedimented histories than it does about the content of those histories. But I include it here to suggest the terrain that might be explored by an interpretive practice willing to engage in serious play with artefacts that might otherwise be overlooked entirely.

This experimental engagement with some of Douglas's dangerous things allows other 'sensible forms' to work alongside the curator in the generation of research materials (Whatmore, 2003). In this instance, an act of 'synchronic handiwork' takes up the raw material of the past and works it into a missive that speaks both to that past and to the lived present. The method celebrates the artefact's status as a temporary arrangement of matter, always on its way to being something else. At Hyde Park Barracks, near Sydney, Australia, rats collected the ephemera of daily life in their nests between the floorboards. When restorationists and 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 (1998: 168). I occasionally attempted a similar strategy at the homestead, opening up my curatorial

activities to the intervention of other organisms. Such strategies may generate 'interpretive ambiguities' (Cronon, 2003: 42), but they also open up different ways of ordering the world, working past an entirely negative reading of material dislocation and dissociation.

## IN CONCLUSION

The interpretive approaches I sketch out in this article – observed decay, ephemeral commemoration, collaborative curation – are presented in a speculative spirit. I am more interested to spark reflection than I am to propose new orthodoxies. I recognize that the kind of material dissolution and disappearance I advocate here would be difficult to implement in most recognized historic sites. If the homestead were to perform as a truly ephemeral monument, for example, the processes I have been describing would be allowed to consume it altogether (Figure 10). This kind of interpretive work is more likely to occur with materials that lie at the fringes of conservation practice, or with things held in a state of limbo before more formal arrangements around preservation and public access take hold. It is possible, however, to imagine how established museums and heritage sites might begin to introduce a focus on material process (and a whiff of miasma) into a mode of interpretation that tends to come down heavily on the side of stasis and preservation. The potential for 'entropic heritage' practice remains, for the most part, untapped (DeSilvey, 2005a).

Even a subtle shift in interpretive focus would require some attempt to hold those contrary states in mind – to accept that the artefact is not a discrete entity but a material form bound into continual cycles of articulation and disarticulation. When I was able to pull it off, this kind of approach allowed me to see things that otherwise would have been invisible to me simply because I lacked discursive frames to fit them in.

FIGURE 10 A sign posted as a talisman against the destructive effects of wildfire.



Interpretation, in this sense, constituted otherwise unconstituted matter (Buchli and Lucas, 2001). I was able to read the messages on a wall of tattered newspaper scattered with box-elder seed, the occluded histories in a rodent nest. Such work stakes out an expanded field for the telling of local histories, allowing for the inclusion of inhabitants usually entered in the margins, or consigned to their own separate texts. Instead of asking the artefact to speak to a singular (human) past, such a method works with an ecology of memory – things decay and disappear, reform and regenerate, shift back and forth between different states, and always teeter on the edge of intelligibility. Remembrance comes into its own as a balancing act, an 'art of transience' (Hawkins, 2001) which salvages meaning from waste things and reveals the complexity of our entangled material memories.

### Note

1. 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 even touch the homestead's documents and artefacts for fear of spreading their moulds to her collection. The degraded condition of the materials mediated against their inclusion in public collections and archives – my decision to carry on the work of excavation and curation despite this official rejection is part of a story I do not have room to tell here (DeSilvey, 2005b).

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