Materializing Culture

THE MATERIALITY OF NOTHING

EXPLORING OUR EVERYDAY RELATIONSHIPS WITH OBJECTS ABSENT AND PRESENT

Helen Holmes

ROUTLEDGE

The Materiality of Nothing

The Materiality of Nothing explores the invisible, intangible and transient materials and objects of everyday life and the relationships we have with them. Drawing on over 15 years of original, empirical research, it builds on growing research on the everyday, and unites the established field of material culture and materiality with emerging sociological studies exploring notions of nothing and the unmarked. The chapters cover topics such as lost property, museum curation, plastic microfibres, thrift, music and even hair, illuminating how invisible and intangible materials conjure memories, meanings and identities, inextricably binding us to other people, places and things. In turn, the book also engages with issues of sustainability and consumption, raising questions regarding society's increasing need for material accumulation and posing some alternatives.

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For Seb and Auden – this is why I needed you to keep the noise down!

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1 Introducing material affinities and the potency of connections

Origins

For many academics, the urge to write a book is about bringing together multiple strands of research as part of a coherent project. This book is no different. Indeed, what follows brings together over 15 years of research, weaving together a variety of projects and ideas into the fabric of an alternative approach to thinking about materiality – an approach with material absence and intangibility at its core.

As a scholar of materiality and consumption, I am well versed in the core debates and arguments in these fields, yet I have often felt that they do not fully explain or account for the various phenomena that I have researched. More specifically, they do not account for the potency and relational capacities of the varying objects and material things I have studied. For example, as I expand upon in this book, my PhD research focused on hair, yet hair's transience as a material and its potency within people's lives are underexplored and under-theorised (Holmes, 2015b; Tarlo, 2016). Likewise, my more recent work on plastic, and its invisible qualities, residing in objects most people would never define as 'plastic', cannot fully be accounted for by studies of materiality and consumption to date. Whilst studies of new materialisms and their focus on the relational and everyday importance of materiality go some way to address this lacuna, certain qualities about objects and materials remain ironically absent from debates about objects and materials.

At the heart of this is a need to focus on the invisible, the intangible and the transient qualities of materials and objects and their relevance to how people relate to objects and ultimately how people use objects and things to relate to others. Importantly, to draw on the work of Durkheim ([1912] 2008), many of the objects I study are not the 'sacred', momentous objects which mark out life course trajectories, such as a wedding dress, a child's first shoes or inherited heirlooms from a loved one passed (Finch and Mason, 2000), but instead are the 'profane' and ordinary objects of everyday life. Such objects may reside in homes, but they may also reside in cultural institutions as examples of previous practices and material cultures. As Miller (2005a: 5) notes, 'objects are important not because they are evident and

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physically constrain and enable, but because often we do not "see" them'. As I illustrate, often these mundane items are the most potent in terms of their relational capacities. These capacities are brought to the fore when such objects are lost or are seemingly invisible or shift shape, altering our engagement with them.

Material affinities

To examine the relational capacities and potent connections an object can evoke, the book employs the notion of material affinities, a concept drawing on Mason's work (2008, 2018) on affinities, which I developed through a project exploring contemporary thrift (Holmes, 2019a, 2019b). I provide details on each of the projects this book draws upon in the "Methods and Approach" section. However, this project was pivotal to the development of this book. This three-year thrift project focused on studying the practices, objects and temporalities of everyday thrifty practice. It examined how people perceived thrift and how they engaged and experienced it on a daily basis. A core focus of the research was the objects which aided people's thrifty practices. This involved asking household participants to talk about and show such objects to me and to engage in an object interview (more on that shortly). What was most surprising about this aspect of the study, alongside just how engaged and willing those being interviewed were to show me their thrifty objects, was the number of objects which had been 'passed on' or 'handed down' from family members, friends and neighbours and the narratives attached to them. These objects ranged from kitchen utensils, to large items of furniture, to clothing. Some had been kept in families for over a hundred years, others were recent additions. All could be classed as 'everyday', residing in the mundane spaces of kitchen drawers, garden sheds and bedroom cupboards. Importantly, these were not objects that were simply stored away because they could not be parted with or their present owners did not know what to do with them. Nor were they put on display in cabinets or on mantlepieces as celebrated relics of relatives passed. These were often objects in use and it was their use which brought out their sensory and material qualities.

What emerged from the project was a suite of everyday objects which were imbued with family, and often much broader, relational narratives. Noted examples included a pair of dungarees described with much amusement as having been passed down through the family and there being photos of different cousins all wearing these same dungarees. Another described a bike which had been passed between the children of different families in the street she lived on. Still another participant talked about a rolling pin which she had bought when she married her husband 75 years ago and set up home. Although he had passed away three decades earlier, using the rolling pin always reminded her of him and starting their married life together. Importantly, what all these examples illuminated was how everyday objects and their associated practices of use act as receptacles for memories, family and broader social traditions and imaginaries of kinship. Such items are passed on and continue to be used because they are deemed still useful, but this 'use' is complexly interwoven with 'reckoning', choreographing and celebrating kin ties, both biological and social (Edwards, 2005).

Having been inspired by Mason's ground-breaking work on affinities – this led me to think about how materials and objects enable potent connections and can act as relational conduits to other people, places and times. Mason's (2008, 2018) concept defines affinities 'as personal connections that have potency' and can feel kin-like in some way whether or not they involve kin (Mason, 2018: 1). This theory of affinities is crucial to this book, and the development of the notion of material affinities, in that it captures the ethereal and ephemeral connections of everyday life – whether these be connections to others or connections to things, places or times. In other words, affinities are a means of capturing the essence or magic of connections. Building on the body of work on social and biological forms of kinning (Carsten, 2004; Mason, 2008), material affinities illuminate how objects can reproduce, imagine and memorialise kin and kin-like connections in and through time. This is distinctive from work focused on materiality which explores death and inheritance practices (e.g. Hallam and Hockey, 2001; Hecht, 2001) because as the book illustrates, material affinities do not occur just with objects which are passed on following the death of kin. Yet material affinities are also more than just connections between people – they connect the object to places, to times and to other objects. Material affinities account for the 'field of relations created by an object' (Bissell, 2009: 109).

As this book explores, material affinities embody many different facets. They can be physical and materially visible, such as the signs of wear and tear on an object. They can be sensory and embodied – the way an object feels, tastes or sounds – what its material qualities do for us. They can be and (as I will show) often are emotional – the memories, feelings and attachments an object signifies for us. They can be imagined and ethereal – where we imagine the object has been before, whom it has been owned by, what its future potential might be. They can even be documented forms of affinity – records showing who owned an object and where it was made. Furthermore, multiple forms of affinity can be apparent with an object at any one time, and they are subject to change.

In what follows, I develop the notion of material affinities to explore the potent connections that objects enable with a specific focus on objects which are no longer in our possession or are seemingly not visible or that shift shape over time. This approach is significant because it not only examines these 'nothing' types and spaces of objects but also pays particular attention to mundane and ordinary objects and materials. Material affinities are not restricted to objects on display, used to memorialise the past or to demonstrate a particular identity. Nor are they restricted to objects normally found in the home (Hecht, 2001; Hurdley, 2006). Material affinities are the active connections with other people, places and times any object enables – sacred, profane, present or non-present, kin or kith, individual or collective.

This book has three core aims: first, it develops the scope of material affinities to think about how objects and materials conjure connections beyond kin and kin-like relations – such as in community groups or through collective forms of affinity to particular objects, heritage landscapes or buildings. Second, it explores how material affinities and connections to objects can continue to exist even when objects and materials are no longer physically present or are visibly obvious – hence the materiality of nothing. Third, it considers the potential that a focus on material absence, loss and invisibility offers to debates on consumption and sustainability.

Something about nothing

Vital to the origins of this book and the notion of material affinities is the sociology of nothing. Originating from work by Susie Scott (2018, 2019), the study of nothing focuses on the abstract notion of the unmarked (Brekhus, 1998). As Scott notes, 'sociology has neglected nothing' potentially due to the discipline's focus on the tangibly and socially observable (2019: 2). Nothing involves 'negatively defined nothings and nobodies' or 'non-identity, non-presence and non-participation' (Scott, 2018: 4). Nothing is marked by two distinct modes of social action: acts of commission and acts of omission. In acts of commission, one chooses to do nothing; in acts of omission, the acts of non-doing are much more passive (Scott, 2019). To date, the majority of work on the sociology of nothing has been predominantly theoretical. However, more empirically focused work is beginning to emerge; this includes work by Bannister et al. (2019) on young people's non-participation and non-identification in drinking cultures.

This book adds to this growing body of work which engages empirically with the theory of nothing, focusing on the importance of material nothingness. Whilst this in itself is, of course, an oxymoron – the physical capacities of materials render an object or material 'something' not 'nothing' – the concept of nothing enables us to think beyond objects as bounded containers and, in keeping with the work of Ingold (2010, 2012), to think about the traces, trails and further connections they enable. Nothing enables us to explore objects long gone from our possession but never forgotten, materials which hide in plain sight, and objects and materials which change material form and which we cannot quite tangibly place. Nothing provides the foundations to understand the material affinities and connections we have to the things around us and those which are no longer with us.

Two key aspects of the sociology of nothing which the book develops are absence and loss. Scott discusses the loss of embodied objects such as hair, teeth or significant loved ones and how this loss can leave a ghostly presence. Whilst absence can be in the form of symbolic objects that we have never possessed but that can create a void in our lives, as we imagine what having them would be like (Scott, 2018, 2019). Both these aspects are crucial to this book as we consider how material loss and absence are experienced and what manifests in their place – be this loss of a favourite item and how we remember it or absence of an item we dearly want to possess. Material loss has received little attention within academia. Work by Lamb (2004) explores lost objects in historical accounts emphasizing the need to explore the 'soul of the [lost] thing' and the qualities which make an object 'peculiarly the owner's own' (2004: 953). Likewise, work by Smith (2021) explores lost property practices within 18th- and 19th-century London and how absence shaped urban material cultures. Research by Pahl and Pollard (2010) explores the significance of lost migrant objects and their connections to narratives and identity, whilst a study by Burman (2022: 283) on the contemporary era focused on discarded and found childhood items to reveal the 'nostalgic affectivities' of out of place objects. The latter chimes with work by Bissell (2009) on the unintentional loss of clothing and 'out of place' affectivities. However, loss remains somewhat peripheral to academic accounts, as does work on material absence. As discussed below, most work on materiality, and what makes this book unique, focuses on materially present objects – things which we can see and touch and which have an active physical presence in people's lives. Those which are absent, hidden or invisible pose challenges to researchers because of their very absence. One field which has touched upon absence is that of consumption studies, particularly work focused on disposal.

Consumption connections

Hetherington's work on disposal and absence is also important here and helps to provide a bridge between the more abstract notions of nothing and affinity to more tangible aspects of consumption studies. Drawing on work by Derrida (1994) and Munro (1995), Hetherington (2004) studied practices of disposal and the material traces that thrown-away and discarded objects can leave behind. Using the term 'absent presence' (borrowed from Derrida), Hetherington (2004: 168) discusses how their 'erasure' is 'never complete', leaving behind feelings of unease about things we may have disposed of too soon or annoyance at things we held on to for too long. These feelings of unease resonate within many of the stories presented in this book, particularly those which focus on the loss of objects and the anticipation that lost objects may once again be found. Indeed, I illustrate how the loss of particular objects influences our future experiences with other objects, including the ones chosen as replacements, but also more generally in the care and attention we give to future things. As Bille et al. (2010: 4) note, 'what may be materially absent still influences people's experiences of the material world' and this is certainly the case with the stories presented here. In keeping with Meyer (2012: 7), my approach to absence is one that recognises that absence is not a 'thing in itself but something which is made to exist through relations that give absence matter'. It is the remembering, the memorialising and the material affinities to other people, places and times that objects absent (and present) afford that are key.

Hetherington's (2004) work is part of a rich body of study focused on everyday or what Gronow and Warde term 'ordinary consumption' (2001). Now encompassing a 20-year history, work on everyday forms of consumption emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a counterbalance to the previous symbolic and identity-focused postmodern readings of consumer cultures (e.g. Barthes, 1957; Baudrillard, 1970, 1981; Giddens, 1991). This sea change towards a 'rematerialisation' of social and cultural studies (Jackson, 2004: 172) disrupted the long-standing reign of 'symbol over substance' approaches (Gregson and Crewe, 1998: 40) and encouraged a focus on the objects and materials of consumption rather than those that consumed them. Emerging from this material turn were a plethora of fascinating studies exploring the profane and mundane of consumption activities. From second-hand shopping at car boot stalls (Gregson and Crewe, 1998) and nearly new sales (Clarke, 2001) and in charity shops (Gregson and Crewe, 2003), to food consumption and food shopping (Miller, 1997, 2002), to clothing (Dwyer and Jackson, 2003; Kuchler and Miller, 2005), home décor (Miller, 2005a), do-it-yourself (DIY) and making (Campbell, 2005), this research was varied and vibrant. This trajectory has evolved to more recent work which considers the consumption of services, including energy (Gram Hanssen, 2011; Spurling, 2018), WiFi (Wheeler and Glucksmann, 2015) and recycling (Eden, 2015). Linking back to Hetherington, a growing tranche has focused on disposal and waste, including food waste (Evans, 2012, 2014; Gregson et al., 2015) and household goods waste (Gregson et al., 2013). Such studies make significant links between everyday consumption and broader issues of overconsumption, sustainable resource use and ultimately climate change impacts. This body of work is instrumental to this book – providing the foundations not just for its focus on everyday and ordinary forms of consumption and their connections to the 'wicked problems' of the Anthropocene (e.g. climate change) (Sardar, 2010) but also for its centring of the material.

The 'Crisis of Accumulation'

A core part of this book unites my research with cultural institutions with that of personal and household consumption. Whilst this may seem like an unusual combination, as I go on to illustrate this is because societies, predominantly those in the Global North, and cultural institutions are facing what the archaeologist Rodney Harrison (2013a: 580) refers to as a 'crisis of accumulation'. We have too much stuff, or at least those in the Global North have too much stuff. Drawing upon Marx, Harrison stresses this in relation to heritage practices, yet its resonance with everyday consumption patterns cannot be ignored. Overconsumption and the continued threat to the world's resources through the desire for consumer goods, and their disposal, constitute a global crisis of epic proportions (Jackson, 2009; Soper, 2007, 2020). The 'throwaway society' illuminates a care-free attitude to the accumulation and disposal of objects and materials, resulting in mountains of waste that threaten the continued existence of the planet. Harrison notes there are distinct parallels between how we view the heritage of the natural environment and how we view that of the cultural. Our treatment of the material lies at the heart of this, uniting heritage practices with sustainability. As cultural institutions face dilemmas over future heritage and what should be kept and preserved, so everyday homes face decisions over object accumulation and their responsible disposal (Evans, 2012, 2019 Gregson et al., 2007; Gregson, 2011). What we choose to preserve for the future has lasting consequences for society – from natural history specimens which later may be used in research to cure disease or an individual's shoe collection that eventually ends up in landfill. As I go on to explore throughout the book, value is at the crux of these practices, entwined with the affinities we have to things and ultimately determining the success of any alternatives to material forms of accumulation (see Chapter 6).

Materiality

Given the book's title and the aforementioned focus on material affinities, it is self-evident that this is a book very much focused on materials, their agency, relational capacities and our engagement with them. As noted, 'The Material Turn' in the 1990s enabled objects and materials, as opposed to their owners and users, to be prioritised. Work on material culture, previously a domain of anthropology and design and textile studies, emerged from other social science disciplines keen to revitalise debates on society and culture with a focus on the very stuff of everyday life. With it came a slew of theories devoted to the study of material and material culture, including Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005), assemblage theory (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) and objectification (Miller, 2005b). As Woodward (2020) notes, the available theories with which to explore materiality and material culture are varied and complex. My work borrows from these differing theoretical perspectives, leaning more on certain theories with different projects (see also Woodward, 2020). At times, I draw on the abilities of materials and objects to 'act back' (Latour, 2005) displaying their agency and potency (see Chapter 5). Similarly, I consider how objects and materials are interrelated with other objects and materials, people, times and places, in what may be considered assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) (see Chapters 3 and 4). However, my work mostly leans towards Miller's (2005b) theory of objectification and an understanding of objects and materials as emergent not passive. This notion of the active nature of objects and materials is particularly illuminated in Chapters 5 and 6. Such work connects to more recent debates on materiality and the emerging genre of work on new materialism focused on the performative nature of matter.

Miller's theory of objectification has been similarly crucial in thinking about the subject–object divide. As noted, previous studies of consumer culture had focused on identity formation and objects as symbolic markers of identity. In other words, objects were deemed passive vessels to be used by the subject to express themselves. Theories of materiality have attempted to redress this imbalance by focusing on the agency and role of objects and materials. Nonetheless, one issue with this is that academics tend to prioritise one over the other (more on that shortly with regard to methods). Miller's concept instead focuses on the active and emergent interrelationships between the two. As Miller (2005b: 10) notes, 'there is a level of philosophy at which it is wrong to talk about subjects and objects' because 'all that is prior is the process of objectification'. In other words, objects and subjects come into being through the continual process of objectification – they are not static or fixed or dualised. However, Miller does recognise the need for a 'common sense' approach which 'recognises the distinction between subjects and objects' (p.10), and to my mind this is where much research on materials and objects begins from. Indeed, I would argue that to overcome subject–object dualisms, we must start from them, especially because it is through those very distinctions that our participants understand and make sense of the world.

Before we turn to methods, one final thing about materiality – and that is that this book uses the terms objects, materials and materiality (along with things, stuff and matter) interchangeably. Whilst this approach may be frowned upon in some circles of materiality theory, this is perhaps reflective of the relational approach I have taken with my work – choosing to see materials/objects as emergent and potent rather than bounded and static. Indeed, this book is very much about recognising the plurality and agency of even the most seemingly passive or unchangeable of things but also those things that society is only just realising the material potential and reach of (e.g. plastic). In this sense, my work aligns itself to studies of new materialism and their focus on recognising the plurality and 'lively' dimensions of materials. Such work highlights the need for scholars of materiality to critically address the 'the scientific and technological advances predicated on new scientific models of matter' from bioengineering to the digital revolution (Coole and Frost, 2010: 5). This involves recognising the increasingly complex entanglement of the human and non-human and what Bennett (2010: 47) calls 'vital materialism', whereby 'matter is an active principle' which 'inhabits us and our inventions' but 'also acts as an outside or alien power' (see also Bennett, 2009). Thus, whilst my work leans much more towards 'older' theories of materiality, such as objectification (even though there are overlaps), new materialism's critical approach to the evolving nature of 'matter' is highly relevant to my work and particularly my interdisciplinary research.

Methods and approach

The methods I have used to conduct the research discussed in this book are varied. All qualitative in nature, they include semi-structured interviews, participant observation, focus groups and Mass Observation data, alongside more creative and experimental techniques, including visual methods (photos and videos) and material-based methods. The latter have been particularly relevant to my work and my wish to illuminate the agency and potency of objects and materials. To date, the majority of methods to study materiality either view the object as a container for people's narratives (Digby, 2006) or, in contrast, focus on the biography of the object (Cook et al., 2004). The former reveals 'object relations' (Hurdley, 2006) or 'relational extensions' (Latimer and Munro, 2009) – in other words, the object as a reflection of the self and one's connections; the latter adopts approaches such as follow-the-thing (Cook et al., 2004), focused on revealing the journey that an object takes from raw material to consumption to disposal (e.g. Knowles's (2014) work on flip flops, Tarlo's (2016) work on hair and Norris' (2010) work on clothing). Either approach undoubtedly has its benefits, but both essentially render the voice of the other silent.

In keeping with Miller's theory of objectification, my wish has always been to explore the object and subject together – instead thinking about the dynamic relational connections they enable. A highly influential paper in facilitating me to adapt this into a methodological approach is that of Humphries and Smith (2014) and their fascinating work on Xerox photocopiers. This piece outlines a practical approach for engaging with objects and materials in a way that illuminates their 'enmeshed relationships' (2014: 482). It calls for researchers of materiality to pay attention to three core areas: object materiality, object practice and object biography. Object materiality relates to paying attention to an object's physical properties – how it feels, looks, smells, tastes and so forth. Object practice calls for an appreciation of the activities an object undertakes and how they enmesh objects and subjects. Object biography involves exploring the lives of objects and how they relate to those of subjects. For Humphries and Smith (2014: 479), the focus is on giving objects a 'louder voice'. This is where my work differs. My emphasis has always been on trying not to prioritise either object or subject and instead focusing on the relational connections between the two.

With this in mind, I have (slowly) adapted Humphries and Smith's approach to take account of the relationality of both object and subject, centring either one when necessary and, importantly, thinking reflexively about the role of the researcher in encountering these relationships (for more information on this method, see Holmes, 2020). Thus, my approach instead looks at materiality, practice and biography of both object and subject and how the two are entwined. When exploring materiality, I consider the materiality of the object but then also how this is described and encountered by the participant and also myself as researcher. How does something look, feel?

What are my reactions to it? What are the participant's? With practice – I explore the activities the object is intended to undertake, those it does undertake and how the participant is involved. This includes thinking about if the object has any symbolic significance – perhaps some sentimental resonance. In keeping with Actor Network Theory and Assemblage theory approaches, I consider, with the participant, how the object connects to other objects, materials, practices and people and the networks it is enmeshed in. Biography involves thinking about the lives of the object and the participant. What is the origin of the object? How did it come into the participant's ownership? How are the two enmeshed? All of this then builds up a collection of data which is focused very much on the relational aspects of the participant and object. At times, one is more centred than the other. This can happen when thinking about biography as often only the owner can speak for the biography of the object. Nonetheless, it offers a way of exploring the connections and affinities between object and subject. Importantly, these three areas of focus are often interrelated, so whilst I have described them as standalone, when conducted during an interview they are likely to merge. Likewise, this is a method I have regularly incorporated into a standard semi-structured interview. This has worked particularly well when conducted in situ (e.g. in people's homes if discussing household objects).

It is also a method I have had to adapt to deal with the transient and often invisible or hidden nature of the objects and materials I wish to study. Whilst my work on thrift had involved many discussions about absent objects, it was in my project on lost property (see below for more information on the projects) where this method really developed. Being in a situation where the focus of your work was on objects which were no longer physically present in people's lives called for a method which enabled objects to be recollected and remembered. Sometimes, this involved drawing the lost object; other times, it was through vivid memories, including what something felt like, looked like and how it was part of the participant's life. Of course, as Smart (2007: 40) notes, memories are not static and 'change to suit an audience'. Our questions and the focus on objects lost had the potential to influence participant's memories, potentially leading to embellishment and reconstruction. This has also been recognised in other work on objects and memories, such as Pahl and Pollard's (2010) work on lost migrant objects and Hurdley's (2006) research on mantlepiece objects. However, object interviewing remained the best technique for accessing the material affinities lost objects leave behind. Another way in which object interviewing has been useful has been in my more recent work on plastic. This research has involved exploring plastic and how it is engaged with in different spaces around the home. What has been particularly illuminating in this (and as I discuss in Chapter 5) has been the hidden and unseen nature of many forms of household plastic. From caulking around the bath, to the polymers in many household products such as cleaning wipes, to micro- and nano-plastics which reside in water, air and soil but which are not visible to the naked eye. Drawing on aspects of object interviewing, particularly around materiality and practice, has enabled this hidden and invisible aspect of plastic to be revealed.

Combining object interviewing with the other methods I have used in my work enables the relational capacities of objects and materials to be illuminated. As I discuss in the following chapters, such techniques have been folded into standard interview formats; combined with visual methods, including photographs and video – when objects and materials are visually present – or drawing and recollections when they are not; and enhanced by additional rich data from fieldnotes, focus groups, participant observation and (where relevant) archival materials. My analytical approach has remained the same regardless of the type of qualitative data I am handling. I always use a thematic approach developing a suite of etic and emic codes which reflect the data. This I tend to do via the old-fashioned method of pencil crayons and paper rather than using software. Whilst triangulating so many different sorts of qualitative data can be challenging, this combination of methods has been paramount to the development of the notion of material affinities because it gives voice to the lived and emergent experiences of both subjects and objects.

The projects

This book brings together five projects spanning more than a decade of research. Whilst these projects have in many ways been as disparate as they have been similar, at the heart of each of them has been a focus on materiality and objects. My interest in materiality and material culture stems from my master's degree research (not discussed here). A rather unusual focus on women's underwear, entitled 'The good, the bad and the ugly', and revealed some fascinating findings about the most mundane yet concealed of clothing items.

The Hair Project

This focus on the materially 'mundane' paved the way for my PhD on hairdressing and the practices of women's haircare, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (2006–2010) (see Holmes, 2014, 2015a, 2015b). This was my first foray into ethnographic methods and involved spending 12 months working in a hair salon as a salon junior. Kirby's was an independent salon in the North West of England, employing 13 members of staff, all but one of whom identified as female. Sweeping up hair, making hot drinks, cleaning the salon, answering the phone and washing clients' hair were some of my duties, enabling me to be at the forefront of salon practices and importantly what was happening with hair. I also attended an evening college course on haircare and styling for a period of six months, and this meant that I could experiment with the hair practices I could only observe in the salon, such as hair colouring. This intensive period of participant observation was followed by 10 focus groups – nine of which were with clients or friends of clients (all female, bar one mixed focus group) about their haircare experiences and one focus group with the salon stylists. Ten interviews with one person from each focus group followed to explore key themes which emerged during the focus groups. I also took numerous photographs and videos of haircare practices which formed a central part of my analysis and subsequently my thesis. As with many PhD experiences (Bricknell, 2020), this research had a profound effect on my future research trajectory. Working in the salon, engaging with hair and those who worked with hair on a day-to-day basis, and being enveloped into this beauty- and body-focused sphere of consumption have resonated throughout my career. This has been not just through an enduring interest in mundane and 'hidden' forms of materials and objects but through a continued focus on the sensorial and embodied aspects of materiality; the practices, skills and labour that objects and materials afford; and also their temporalities.

The Thrift Project

A three-year research fellowship funded by the University of Manchester (2015–2018) gave me the space to explore these facets and their connections to materiality further (Holmes, 2018a, 2019a, 2019b), this time through the subject of thrift. 'Makers, make do and mend: a newly thrifty consumer?' is the project which has been pivotal to the development of this book and the notion of material affinities which runs through it. As with my PhD, the Thrift Project – as it is referred to throughout this book – involved combining a variety of qualitative approaches to explore contemporary forms of thrift through the lens of materiality, practice and temporality. Primary data collection was situated along a 30-mile transect in the North West of England, incorporating some of the least deprived and most deprived areas of the country according to the English Indices of Deprivation (ONS, 2015). The project commenced with 18 months of participant observation with four voluntary organisations, including a food bank, a credit union and a community growing scheme. My objective while working with service users and providers was to explore how these organisations worked, the centrality of resources and materials, and the challenges that the organisations and their service users faced. This was supplemented with 30 in-depth interviews with a diverse mix of people of varying socio-economic backgrounds, genders, ethnicities and ages who lived along the transect. These interviews focused on activities of making, mending, extending and lending conducted in the home and incorporated creative methodologies, including object interviews as discussed above and (on some occasions) go-alongs in the form of accompanied shopping trips or taking part in clothes swaps and other activities (see also Rose, 2020; Cook, 2020). Such interviews would often include me taking photographs to capture different objects and practices I observed and participants discussed. This North West–focused data was further supplemented and enhanced by a nationwide Mass Observation Directive I issued in Summer 2016 on

'Being Thrifty' (see Mass Observation, 2016 for further details). This was issued to Mass Observation's 500 responders. At the time of the directive, there was a slight gender bias; 60% identified as female, and the South East of England was the most represented region in terms of respondents' geographic location. The directive asked respondents what they thought of when they thought of thrift, what sorts of thrifty activities they, their neighbours and communities engaged in, and how such practices connect to waste. I received 169 responses, ranging from half a side of A4 to six pages. This data was triangulated along with the interview data, fieldnotes and visual materials, and all was thematically analysed, coded and organised.

As noted, this project was fundamental to the concept of material affinities and indeed was the inspiration for me to write this book. The focus of participants and respondents on objects throughout each stage of my data collection was surprising. But what really shone through was the relational capacities of the most mundane of items and that this relationality was inextricably woven with the material qualities and capacities of the objects being discussed. In other words, it was not just because of the 'who, what or when' the objects represented and symbolised that were so significant, but how 'the who, what or when' was illuminated and brought to life by the object *in use*. As discussed, whilst this book touches on the spectacular and the special (relegated to special cabinets and put out on display), it was the ordinary and mundane objects which really stood out and best encapsulated the notion of material affinities. That being said, my work on lost property enabled a very different approach to thinking about the relational capacities of objects.

The Lost Property Project

A key insight from my research on thrift was how so many participants spoke about objects they no longer had in their possession. Vivid recollections, significant memories and love for objects no longer present were core to so many participant accounts. This tallies with Pahl and Pollard's study (2010: 7) on migrants and objects and how lost objects, from suitcases to shoes, could be 'vividly described' by migrant participants. Yet, just as with the Thrift Project, often these remembered 'treasures' were not spectacular items of high value or huge sentimental significance. They were everyday things – clothing, umbrellas, costume jewellery – yet they left residual, poignant traces; their absence was marked and remembered. This led me to thinking more about loss and how object and material loss is experienced and managed. The catalyst for the project came from a news article detailing how in 2011 the British Museum had lost a £750,000 Cartier diamond ring, presumed stolen. This raised lots of questions for me regarding how museums and cultural institutions manage and prevent object loss and how institutional object loss is similar to or different from personal loss. And so the project was born, supported by a small grant from the University of Manchester (2018–2019). Owing to resources, the project was small but the data collected was incredibly rich. Eighteen interviews were conducted with cultural institutions, lost property offices and members of the public, and the aim was to explore how object loss was experienced and managed. As with the Thrift Project, this involved using an object interview methodology. However, as discussed, this has to be adapted to take into account that the objects discussed were no longer in their owner's possession. Photographs could also not be taken. It was also important to recognise the potential influence this approach may have on participant recollection. As Smart (2007: 40) notes, memories are not static and can 'change to suit an audience'. The narrative process this method evokes may well have led to the reconstruction and embellishment of memories. Nonetheless, despite being a small dataset in comparison with my other projects, this study has been instrumental to this book. As you will see throughout, the data collected has been vitally important to understanding the material affinities of objects and the similarities between our relationships to things in our individual possession and those we perceive are of collective or institutional significance.

The Plastic Project

My next project marked something of a departure from my previous work and in many ways saw me return to some of the approaches and concepts I drew on during my PhD, particularly with regard to thinking more about materials than objects per se. The Plastic Project, or 'One Bin to Rule Them All' to give it its correct title, is focused primarily on household recycling practices and is ongoing. It is a four-year project (2020–2024) funded by a UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund Grant on Smart Sustainable Plastic Packaging (NE/V01045X/1). This project is unique because it brings together social science with material science and business studies to explore the problem of plastic recycling and why so little plastic in the UK is recycled (for more information on this project please see Burgess et al., 2021). The social science work package I lead on has conducted intensive household research with 30 households in one region of Greater Manchester. These households were chosen based on the English Indices of Deprivation (ONS, 2019); 10 were located in an area with a high deprivation score (top 10%), 10 in an area with a low score (lowest 10%) and 10 in an area with an average score (40% least deprived). With each household, we have conducted initial in-depth interviews focused on their thoughts on recycling and current practices. This has involved discussions around re-use, storage of recycling, bin capacity and treatment of different items. We then gave each household a bin for two weeks to put all plastic in, for example, 'One Bin'. The aim of this was to see how simplifying the rules and messaging about what can and cannot be recycled changed household's practices. The One Bin was then collected and materially analysed at a local waste recycling facility to determine the different packaging types and also different types of plastics. We followed up with a post-trial interview discussing with the households what they thought of the trial, any challenges they faced and whether it would change their practices moving forward. This project has created a wealth of data, most of which we are still working through. However, from a materiality perspective and for the purpose of this book, it has been fascinating because it has enabled an exploration of not just the minutiae of household practice but also how such practices are framed by materiality. The material qualities of an object – how something looks, feels and sounds – determine its fate, and this is particularly apparent in recycling practices. Whilst material affinities to something as mundane (and, quite frankly, a bit gross) as plastic waste are not immediately obvious, there are tensions around disposal and making 'the right' decision about the fate of an item, an item which may later haunt us if our decision is incorrect (as I discuss in Chapter 3). The hidden properties of plastic, as discussed in Chapter 5, further illuminate the potency of materials and their abilities to confuse, leak and disrupt.

The Rave Project

The final project I draw upon in this book and my most recent piece of research is one focused on rave. Whilst this perhaps seems even more incongruous to the already eclectic mix of studies I have so far introduced, this too has had a material focus. This project started life as a personal interest project. As someone who was a teenager in the 1990s when rave was at its height and who was raised near Manchester, a city synonymous with famous dance and acid house clubs, such as the Hacienda and Sankeys, I have always been interested in the rave scene. Rave is a broad genre associated with a range of music styles, including dance, techno, and Balearic, alongside acid and house. About five years ago, I started to notice a rise in what I would term 'Rave Renaissance' events – one-off gigs, often sponsored by well-known club brands, which brought together older ravers along with well-known dance music DJs from the '90s rave heyday. I was curious why this was happening and also how and why the landscape of rave had changed from being a nightclub scene to something that was happening at one-off, daytime events. I was fortunately awarded some funding from the University of Manchester to conduct a small project exploring these changes (2019–2020). Along with two co-investigators, one of whom is a well-known dance music DJ, we embarked on a project which involved interviewing both rave fans and music professionals about their thoughts and experiences on rave in the 1990s and how it compares with their experiences today. Although objects were not the focus of these interviews, they were prominent throughout with participants recounting tales of their 'clubbing clothes' and the memorabilia – tickets, flyers, posters or vinyl collections – they had. Such items enabled vivid recollections of times and places gone by, experiences which were never to be fully repeated but which were memorialised through these objects (see Chapter 2).

Furthermore, this study has illuminated an analogue versus digital debate which is touched upon in Chapter 6.

The Chapters

As contended, this book is an exploration of the relational capacities of mundane, unseen, invisible and 'no longer present' objects and how they enable us to connect with other people, places, time and things. Its focus is on the material affinities and connections of what I broadly term the 'materiality of nothing'. It seems fitting to ease us into this journey of nothing with a focus on objects and things which are evidently physically absent. Therefore, Chapter 2 is concerned with object loss and exploring loss at three scales: individual, institutional and collective. Drawing predominantly on my work on lost property but also on rave, it exposes the power of absent objects and illuminates the importance of our material affinities to lost objects and material things and how we enable them to live on through memories, stories and memorabilia. Chapters 3 and 4 work as a pair, moving on from thinking about object loss to consider the journey of consumption and how objects travel. Whilst seemingly counterintuitive, Chapter 3 begins from the point of disposal, working back through the processes of devaluation and divestment to consider how even things we seemingly no longer value, 'objects of nothingness', hold material traces and affinities which are hard to erase. This enables Chapter 4 to consider the other end of the spectrum. Beginning with the processes of acquisition and how this can be both active and passive, I move on to explore how stuff travels – from organised forms of circulating, to family and kin-like circulation, to accidental object circulation, such as finding and keeping an object belonging to someone else. In doing so, I illustrate how material affinities both physical and imaginative are made through these practices and how they too circulate as objects travel. Chapter 5 moves on from exploring the material affinities of bounded, discrete objects to think about the affinities and connections embedded and weaved both physically and sometimes imaginatively within the very material characteristics and 'fabric' of objects. Focused on 'layers and leaking', I consider the potent 'nothingness' of materials such as hair, dust and microplastic and how these often invisible materials have the power to perform and transform. Chapter 6 picks up on this focus on detritus to think about decay and preservation. I explore how decay is managed, negotiated and in certain instances celebrated. In turn, this chapter explores the merits of alternative forms of accumulation, such as digital preservation, and their relevance for material affinities. Chapter 7 draws this monograph to a close, considering how the notion of material affinities and its application to objects and materials which are invisible, absent or transient (nothing) can be used to rethink materiality, enhance studies of consumption and enable sustainable practice.

2 Object loss and material hauntings

Introduction

Why is it that lost things pique our interest? At the time of writing this book, I have encountered numerous media reports and even a few films focused on lost items and, in particular, on trying to find them. These include spectacular treasures, such as the recent excavation of a Roman mosaic and villa in a field in Rutland, UK, or the terrible loss of 400,000 books (including one signed by Queen Victoria in 1868) in a blaze in Flintshire, and the more mundane, including the unearthing of a wedding ring lost in a potato patch in the Scottish Highlands for 50 years. They range from historical artefacts of cultural significance, to hidden landscapes, to everyday items which hold huge sentimental significance. For some reason, lost objects and materials are the subject of much cultural fascination. For example, the famous Indiana Jones films, whilst fictional in their plot, focused on finding the elusive Ark of the Covenant – a religious relic described in the Book of Exodus. Whilst many scholars believe the Ark was destroyed, it remains a longstanding and ongoing mystery of the world, hence the fascination with the films. Thus, objects which are lost, stolen, missing and, on some occasions, found seem to possess a certain potency and beguilement.

In this first chapter to feature participant stories and lived experiences of material affinities of nothing, my concern is with objects and items which go missing and get lost, including items which are stolen. As discussed, material loss has been peripheral in academic accounts with the exception of some historical work (Lamb, 2004; Smith, 2021). However, I argue that material loss is crucial to understanding our everyday relationships to the material world and in turn our relationships to others. Studying loss enables us to understand the enduring relationships that people have with objects and things which are no longer in their possession. Object loss is a form of 'nothing', an absence, a gap in how we experience the material world. As I have argued elsewhere (Holmes and Ehgartner, 2021), loss and its antithesis, finding (see Chapter 4), also offer a rupture point in our accumulation practices. A point where we are forced to confront our reliance on material things because of their sudden removal from our lives. As Graham and Thrift (2007: 2),

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writing about the repair and maintenance of objects, contend, 'things only come into visible focus as things when they become inoperable'. Likewise, as the stories in this chapter illustrate, the importance of an object often becomes apparent only when we no longer possess it. Exploring loss enables us to appreciate the taken-for-granted relationships we have with things or how our feelings towards an object or material change when its loss is threatened. Focusing on the material affinities of lost objects enables us to understand how objects continue to 'live on' through memories, photographs and also cultural references. Importantly, this chapter is focused on the loss of objects, what we might – in practical terms – refer to as discrete, bounded things (though with full recognition that objects are never bounded). Nonetheless, this chapter is about the loss of items, whilst loss more broadly of materials through practices such as decay is developed in Chapter 6.

In this chapter, I draw predominantly upon my work on lost property but also on my recent work on rave (see Chapter 2 for more information about the projects). In what follows, I consider different scales of loss, thinking about individual, institutional and collective forms of loss. This involves considering the loss of items which are typically considered everyday, mundane and insignificant, alongside those which are considered extraordinary, mnemonic things of collective societal significance – such as iconic buildings or items of historical importance. This appreciation of object loss as being at the extremes of both the sacred and profane (Durkheim, [1912] 2008), and everything in between, is important – illuminating the impact that material loss can have not just on the individual but on society. It reveals that we have material affinities not just to stuff we have owned, possessed and experienced through our consumption but likewise to things we have a collective interest in – items of societal significance whether we have visited them or experienced them or not. The second half of the chapter focuses on managing loss and again considers this at different scales. At the individual level, this involves how loss is rationalised and how future loss is prevented by particular strategies. At the collective scale, I explore how material loss is managed in institutional settings, drawing on work with museums, libraries and archives to think about cataloguing and security systems designed to prevent loss.

Individual loss

Caring about everyday things

It seems fitting and perhaps easiest to start with a form of loss each of us can identify with: the personal or individual loss of objects. When it comes to losing an object, there is a tendency to assume that people will worry or show concern only for items which are deemed financially valuable, which are sentimentally significant because of who or what they represent or which have some other individual worth such as holding personal data. Certainly, all of the participants in the Lost Property Project talked of the fear of losing such items. Jewellery, mobile phones, laptops and mementos of past loved ones were all things that participants worried about losing and often described feelings of anxiety, and sometimes grief, if they had lost such items. Such lost items had clear material affinities – despite being lost, they remained connected to their previous owners through acts of remembrance and memorialisation. They could be recounted and recollected. However, there were similar levels of distress shown towards lost items which did not fit any of these categories. These were objects which one would typically think of as mundane, ordinary and (most of all) easily and cheaply replaceable.

Umbrellas are a case in point. This is an item that many of us own (especially in the UK!). We perhaps own several, but they are an object which is not typically regarded as holding much sentiment, symbolism or significance. Yet for two participants, Melissa and Mira, their lost umbrellas were a source of much disappointment and, to some degree, angst:

> I was in London, it was evening, it had been raining. We had gone into a little French brasserie … usual thing, have your meal, pick your bag up afterwards, brolly was under the table. Went outside, went to go and get it, realised I didn't have it … The thing with this umbrella was, it was a huge big golfing umbrella. It was colourful, it was pastel colours but strong pastel colours, so it's pinks, blues, yellows … I've always remembered that brolly … always missed it. I could draw it for you, it's so vividly in my mind that umbrella.
>
> (Participant Melissa, Lost Property Project)

> I had a lovely umbrella. It was a leopard print umbrella … it's massive. I'm very leopard print. What did I do? Fucking lost it, in a big team meeting. It's been about two years, still not over it.
>
> (Participant Mira, Lost Property Project)

For Melissa and Mira, the loss of their umbrellas was a significant material loss, provoking prominent detailed memories of the objects themselves and the circumstances of their going missing. Whilst umbrellas are deemed cheap, replaceable items, regularly described by participants as something you could buy for a few pounds, the material qualities of these objects remain at the forefront of the participants' minds. For Mira, the umbrella was leopard print and was associated closely to her identity – she is 'very leopard print'. For Melissa, the umbrella was vividly coloured and large, so clear in her memory that she could sketch it. She remembers in detail the night she lost it, as if it is etched on her mind. Whilst Mira laments her umbrella's loss, noting how she is still 'not over it.' These excerpts reveal the prominence of particular lost mundane objects in people's minds – they stick. Other participants talked about treasured gloves or shoes or special trinkets such as shells, sticks and coins. Thus, whilst other lost umbrellas may never be remembered by the participants, these two examples leave striking material memories, enabling these vivid recollections. These accounts illustrate how everyday objects can have potent material affinities, connecting us to the lost object, stretching through time despite their obvious physical absence.

You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone

Pushing further at this idea, the quotations from participants Melissa and Mira also hint at how losing an object brings their importance and material qualities to the fore. In other words, through an object's absence, its agency, material qualities and sensory abilities become pronounced. This idea mirrors the work of Graham and Thrift (2007) and the idea that things become obvious only when we are threatened or faced with their loss. The following quote from participant Paul, who lost his bike, illuminates this idea:

> And it was about £200 … it cost a lot more than that if you want to buy it new, so it's a nice bike … it's the old phrase 'you don't know what you've got till it's gone'. I really missed it once it had gone. I didn't appreciate how good it was, because when I got my next bike it wasn't as good, it was a bit heavier.
>
> (Participant Paul, Lost Property Project)

Although Paul's bike was stolen when it was chained up in a city centre, as he clearly notes, he did not appreciate his bike until it had gone. Its replacement did not materially match it. It was simply not 'as good', its material qualities made it 'heavier' and harder to carry and move around. Thus, the material affinities that Paul had with the bike became apparent only once the bike was no longer in his possession and he was faced with using another. In this sense, the 'nothingness' of the object – its absence – forced the material affinities that Paul had with the object to be revealed.

Melissa's lost flip-flops are another example of losing a mundane item which cannot be properly replaced:

> So it was V festival '99 … and everyone was in the mosh pit and I'd had some flip-flops on. And these were really comfy flip-flops, and they had a bit of wedge kind of heel … if I remember rightly I brought them back from Bali … they were cheap as chips but they were comfortable and they were leather. I'd got lifted up and I could feel my flip-flops coming off. They had gone. Could not find them anywhere. Looked all over this field. I did try and replace them but they were never the same. Gone forever.
>
> (Participant Melissa, Lost Property Project)

This account from Melissa is about a pair of flip-flops – lost 20 years ago at a festival – which she can still vividly remember and still misses. As she discusses, these flip-flops, like Paul's bike, could never be replaced. Any new ones do not live up to the comfort and material qualities of the originals. Participant Sarah, talking about her lost 'good, sturdy' umbrella, concurs: 'you grow a loyalty to objects that you're reliant on'. Certain items, no matter how mundane, are important to people's everyday lives; their material qualities are 'just right'. As with the circumstances of the lost umbrellas, those of the loss of the flip-flops are crucial to remembering them, conjuring up their material affinities and what they meant, and still mean, to the owner. These are tangible, vivid memories of possessions long gone, kept alive by the narratives of yesteryear they are part of.

Items that haunt

It is fair to argue that for many participants in the Lost Property Project the loss of certain everyday objects left 'a gap' in their day-to-day lives. That may be an object they were reliant upon for certain material qualities, such as Paul's bike or Melissa's flip-flops. For others, this gap was more pronounced, and they described feeling almost haunted by the lost object. As Hetherington (2004: 168), in his work on disposal and drawing on the earlier work of Derrida (1994) and Munro (1995, 1998), concludes, an object's 'erasure is never complete' (see also Chapter 3). Absent objects haunt us by being both physically absent yet also present in our lives through trace effects. I would argue that these trace effects are the material affinities we continue to have with lost and absent things. Joanie alludes to this when she discusses a lost pottery cat which her grandmother had given her:

> I lost a little cat that was very dear to me, that my Nana gave me, and it was broken, and I'd glued it together but the loss of that cat made the cat more visible.
>
> (Participant Joanie, Lost Property Project)

Joanie's cat, whilst ordinary in terms of being an ornament, is a little different from the other items discussed so far in this chapter in that it is primarily of sentimental worth and does not have a specific 'use' in the sense the other items do. Despite being broken, the cat reminded Joanie of her Nana. As she notes, its loss and the broken state it was in make the cat more visible. It no longer being present in her life reminds Joanie of whom the loss symbolises (see Chapter 5 for further discussion on broken objects). In other words, the loss of the cat amplifies its importance and sentiment within Joanie's life, making it even more worthy of being memorialised. Despite its physical 'nothingness' in Joanie's life, the pot cat's material affinities continue to live on through Joanie's remembrance.

For others, the gap is more of a jarring feeling about the lost thing and a prolonged sense of wondering where it is now:

> It was kind of curious because time would go by and I would think 'where is that?', you know ... 'I wonder where the watch ...' If somebody else asked me significant things that I've lost, the watch would probably always be at the top of that list.
>
> (Participant Steven, Lost Property Project)

As these quotes illuminate and as I pick up in the next chapter, objects continue to haunt long after they have gone. In Joanie's case, the lost cat represented her Nana; for Steven, the item was more of an everyday thing that he cared about, and he wanted to know what had happened to it. These objects have trace effects, bound up in the invisible material agency of lost objects. They leave not only a gap in people's possessions but a sense of mystery, and haunting, regarding what has happened to them. Whilst different in the sorts of 'gaps' they leave, all of these losses are forced states of dispossession, amplifying feelings of unfairness and uneasiness.

Institutional loss

It's not lost, it's misplaced

Caught between the realms of individual loss of everyday items and the collective societal loss of objects of mnemonic significance (to follow) is the realm of institutional loss. As mentioned, the catalyst for the Lost Property Project was a news report about the loss of the highly valuable diamond ring from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. This really piqued my interest regarding how loss of items occurs within institutional settings which are established to curate and care for things and preserve them for future generations. Yet whilst highly valuable items going missing from a museum or archive are likely to attract widespread attention, loss is actually a constant factor within institutional settings such as museums and archives. Not least are the difficulties in managing the continual threat of material decay via ageing or fragility, as I discuss in Chapter 6. However, an item going missing is also more of a regular occurrence than one might expect.

This notion of things being 'missing' or 'misplaced', as opposed to lost, was mentioned quite frequently during the institutional interviews for the project and highlights an important distinction in how loss is negotiated and approached within institutional settings.

> Well the museum has a huge collection so if you put something in the wrong place it can take you ages to find it…I lost a shell for ages but it was just because I was in a hurry one day and I put it in a drawer, I was doing too many things, I put it in a drawer. Now where's that bloody

> shell? And it's a funny story to tell this but then years later, and it was a number of years, I had a volunteer just go through the drawers and said just see if you can find this big orange shell, and no one could ever find it and then we just found it one day. And it was just in a drawer. And it even had a label on the drawer saying someone had documented the thing, [missed] and yeah, it was not lost, just misplaced.
>
> (Museum Curator, Lost Property Project)

> There are times when we can't find the books that have been catalogued and we know that they are here because they must have been misplaced by library staff when they were put back.
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

> I mean, it's quite easy sometimes for sort of things to sort of be mislaid for a while. It's not that they're missing, it's that, if something… But we've never actually lost anything, yeah.
>
> (Museum Curator, Lost Property Project)

In all of these quotes, it is stressed that items are not lost, they are misplaced. This framing of loss is important, particularly given the institutional setting. To lose something suggests a lack of care and attention and perhaps a finality to its fate. Losing something, being careless with an item in an institution's care, would compromise the custodianship of it: that is the institution's legal responsibility to care for the item in their possession. This narrative of carelessness associated with losing something was similarly reiterated by participants in the public interviews. One participant in the Lost Property Project, Kirsty, who described herself as a serial loser of objects, described how losing an object, particularly something you had been given as a gift, made it 'look like you don't care.' Thus, object loss is often wrapped up in notions of negligence and inattention. However, misplacing an item suggests a temporary period of absence and a confidence that the item will turn up, returned to its rightful place. Framing something as misplaced suggests that there is still care for the item, that it is being sought and will be found. This is important for institutions whereby legal obligations of custodianship exist and the expectation is that items are cared for and preserved for the collective future.

Issues of size

It is no wonder, though, that items do get misplaced in institutions, particularly given the size of their overall collections. One institution we spoke to has over 4.8 million objects and specimens, and as one of their curators notes:

> Well the museum has a huge collection so if you put something in the wrong place it can take you ages to find it.
>
> (Museum Curator, Lost Property Project)

Given the size of the museum's vast collection, it is little surprise that when things are misplaced it is like looking for a needle in a haystack. We will move on to preventing loss (in the second part of this chapter), but cataloguing was often discussed as one method of keeping tabs on where items are within the institution. However, cataloguing is often not possible for all items, and again this is due to the vast size of collections:

> You don't necessarily catalogue every single object with an archive…we don't have everything catalogued.
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

A huge issue for institutions is having the resources to catalogue every item – meaning that often decisions must be made about what is worthy of being catalogued. As I will discuss shortly, with issues around different cataloguing processes and systems which have been used over the years (particularly given that many of these institutions are decades if not hundreds of years old), and the changing priorities regarding what is deemed an item of significance, it is no wonder that there is huge potential for loss to occur within institutional settings.

Everyday items

It is the latter regarding changing priorities which is worthy of further mention here and connects to some of the themes emerging from the section on individual loss. In many instances, the items in the collections discussed by the institutions we interviewed are not necessarily deemed 'valuable'. Indeed, they may actually be very 'everyday' in nature – shells, eggs, flyers, lightbulbs. Their value might stem from being part of a wider collection, such as a collection of butterflies from a particular part of the world, or a series of books, but individually they may be deemed relatively insignificant. Thus, there is value in the connections, the affinities, between objects.

As in the section on individual loss, this everyday quality to some institutional objects raises issues of value and how value is determined. Value may be related to an item's financial worth, its provenance, rarity, age, the materials it is made from and, of course, its contemporary significance. I develop this in more detail in the following chapter, but importantly it also illuminates a move within many institutions towards what is termed an 'equality of objects'. This involves each and every object being given the same treatment in terms of preservation (see Chapter 6). It marks a distinctive move within institutions and their approach to objects. Rather than certain objects being more highly prized than others (as was/is often the status quo within many institutions), an equality-of-objects approach would see all objects in all collections treated the same. In practice, such a move should prevent objects being misplaced; but, perhaps in reality, having the resources to treat all objects equally, particularly within large collections, is potentially limited.

A further point to consider regards the potency of collections, and this leads me to my final theme within institutional loss: theft. Whilst such items may be deemed everyday, often their significance lies in their role as being part of a particular collection, as I have noted. In other words, it is their collectivity which grants them relevance. Indeed, as Belk (1995, p. 67) notes, collections 'are part of a set' – be they personal of institutional. Items are connected and have material affinities by the very virtue of being part of a collection. They have similarities – perhaps being the same type of thing (e.g. a shell), originating from the same geographical region, or being from the same historical era. Such affinities between items in a collection may be more mundane and less obvious. They may have sat in the same box or on the same shelf for a period of time or even been handled by the same curator for many years. They have been chosen by someone at some point to be put together as a collection. There may even be a written or digital record of the more obvious geographical, historical, object-type connections (see the discussion of provenance in Chapter 4). Therefore, there are both established material affinities between items within a set but also less tangible ones. Remove, lose or misplace one of these items and this has an impact on the collection and the material affinities that it and its objects afford.

Theft

Alongside things being misplaced, theft is another means through which items are lost in institutions. And it seemingly occurs with some of the oddest of items. This links both to the discussions on everyday objects of significance and to Chapter 3 and the discussion of value. Just as individual loss illuminates how people place huge significance upon a range of everyday items, institutional theft highlights the range of unusual things which are deemed highly prized and the role that material affinities plays in this.

> We have had a few thefts but they are mostly a long time ago. There were some egg, there are some particular things in museums, some psychological, egg nicking, birds eggs is definitely one of them, little beautiful Japanese ivories is another. Shells….You're not talking about members of the public, you're talking about fanatics….. They are well-known thefts from museums where people have had either, could have been volunteers, they've been stealing stuff and then I believe we have got some eggs missing and I would guess they've been missing since the 70s.
>
> (Museum Curator, Lost Property Project)

> We do have very colourful stories about people who we know that have stolen things in the past that have worked here. One of whom was a witch….and he did steal some witchcraft books.
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

Both the museum curator and librarian participants who gave these quotes were keen to point out that a lot of theft of items from their institutions was very much focused on 'fanatics' – people who wanted to possess certain objects because of what they meant to them as a collector or fan of that particular thing or subject. In some instances, this relates to highly valuable and what we might term, using Durkheim's ([1912] 2008) notion, sacred items. This may involve financially, culturally, historically significant items, such as the very publicised theft of famous artworks. Famous examples include the theft in 1990 of the Johannes Vermeer painting *The Concert* from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. This was stolen along with 12 other artworks with an estimated total value of $500 million. It has not been recovered. In other instances, such as those discussed previously, this can be the theft of these more ordinary items – shells, eggs, or more obscure but not necessarily prized objects, such as the witchcraft books.

As the Librarian participant discussed, often such thefts are about possession:

> 'people wanting these things in order to possess them, and they don't want other people to have access to that'
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

As she goes on to note, it's 'very Baudrillard' and indeed it is. As Baudrillard contends, 'the everyday passion for private property is often stronger than all the others' ([1968] 1996: 1). Collectors or fanatics want to own these objects. They want them for their own private viewing and satisfaction. The ultimate possession is to remove them from public access and from the collective form of ownership they have via institutions. Yet as Baudrillard ([1968] 1996: 2) goes on to note, 'the fulfilment of the project of possession always means a succession or even a complete series of objects', and for the fanatical collector, owning only one of something is not enough. This connects back to the sociology of nothing and the notion of material affinities. These absent objects create a void, or what Scott (2018, 2019) refers to as an act of omission. The collector/thief can only imagine what having them would be like. They can 'nevertheless be perceived, imagined or remembered' (Scott, 2018: 11). The 'missing' objects have trace effects, they are imbued with imaginative material affinities. The thief imagines what it would be like to look at, touch, and own these objects. Their absence is only heightened by the addition of those the thief does have in their possession, reminding them further of the missing things and their potential material affinities. This is a similar notion to the 'gaps' experienced by individuals who lose significant items, such as Joanie's pottery cat or Paul's car keys. The difference here, though, is that such items were never in the thief's possession in the first instance; they have never actually owned them or experienced their material qualities.

It is worth noting that institutional theft, even of the more 'ordinary' (in the sense that they are not famous) type objects, is also the domain of criminal gangs and organised crime. One museum curator spoke of a crime ring involved in stealing birds of paradise. Interestingly, these were stolen for their feathers to produce Victorian pattern fishing lines! Apparently, there was also a spate of rhino horn thefts across institutions. Both the librarian and archivist participants talked of things ending up on second-hand selling platforms such as eBay:

> I remember going to a meeting years and years ago where I used to work, saying they were worried about things that were turning up on eBay that they thought had probably come from their collections.
>
> (Archivist, Lost Property Project)

> There was a famous case in ABC Library where somebody was stealing things from their special collections and they were selling them on eBay.
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

Thus, whilst there are fanatics with their sights set on institutional items for personal possession, there are also organised criminal gangs with very much an economic imperative. Such items are removed from public and collective access/ownership and are never seen again. Of course, with the birds of paradise, they are essentially destroyed – their feathers being the only material trace of the bird. The internet as a means of selling stolen institutional items is also interesting and connects to the discussion on circulation in Chapter 4. Whilst the digital age facilitates greater access to institutional objects and collections through websites, virtual tours and so forth, it also seemingly offers a means to move items along and, in this instance, out of public consumption.

Needless to say, reporting theft from collections is an embarrassment for institutions. It once again connects to notions of care and custodianship of objects. It also potentially indicates lax security measures. This brings us back to thinking about how institutions work to prevent and manage loss, as I will discuss shortly. Finally, though, it is important to consider what is meant by 'institutional theft'. Indeed, there have been calls recently for many objects residing in institutions to be repatriated to their country of origin. Encyclopaedic museums, as they are often known (McDonald, 2002), are thought to contain thousands of items which were acquired by force during times of colonial rule, conflict and violence. Such items may have been in the care of institutions for many decades, but advocates for repatriation maintain that they are the cultural property of their country of origin and should be returned. This, of course, creates huge moral, ethical and legal dilemmas for institutions. It also raises vital concerns regarding ownership of objects, the relevance of material connections and affinities, and historical loss. It leads us to explore collective loss.

Collective loss

Collective symbolic objects

Caught somewhere between individual loss and institutional loss is collective loss. As I have illustrated, institutional forms of loss raise issues regarding ownership and collective access, particularly as the main remit of institutions is to preserve objects for collective enjoyment and future generations. However, collective access is also individual, in the sense that we each experience objects and institutional exhibitions in very personal ways. What moves one person and stirs up particular emotions, memories or thoughts may have different effects on another, and for some people little effect at all. Art works, for example, are deemed to generate different aesthetic experiences. Some people find Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* beautiful, others have deemed the painting miserable. Museum objects are similar, conjuring up particular moods and thoughts. According to Cameron and Gatewood (2003), institutional objects can create numinous experiences (see also Latham, 2007). Such experiences are based on what are termed 'numinous objects', defined by Maines and Glynn (1993: 10) as objects which enable 'association, real or imagined, with some person, place, or event endowed with special sociocultural magic'. In a more anthropological sense, such objects would be described as mnemonic – having the power to stimulate remembering.

As is at the core of this book, objects contain material affinities. They tell stories, transporting us to different times, places and people. Thus, it is no stretch to argue that there are particular 'objects' which hold potent symbolism for significant groups of people. I deliberately use the term 'objects' loosely here to encompass not just physical artefacts and objects, such as those we might find in a museum, library or archive, but also buildings, monuments, spaces, landscapes and even climates. Interested collective groups may be linked culturally, racially, ethnically, geographically, religiously or through some other means. They may encompass a minority of people or be culturally relevant to a vast majority of the globe. Obvious famous examples of the latter include monuments such as the Taj Mahal, the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids and Stonehenge; artefacts such as the Crown Jewels of London or the Dead Sea Scrolls; and landscapes and regions such as the Amazon Rainforest, the Lake District, designated UNESCO World Heritage sites such as the Great Barrier Reef or Galapagos Islands. There are many to choose from. We may never have physically experienced these things – been there, seen them or touched them – but in our digitally mediated world, many of us will have an appreciation of them and their history, and they will hold some collective symbolism in our lives. They are what we might refer to as iconic within our lives.

Many such 'objects' or icons take on further symbolism because they are perceived to be at risk of loss and under threat. The Great Barrier Reef, for example, has received much media coverage due to the impact of climate change which is warming the ocean and bleaching the coral and killing it. As a result, more people are aware of the threat to the reef and the potential loss of this important ecosystem. A more 'object-like' example is the fire that devastated Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris in 2019. The images of the famous spire on fire were displayed around the globe and caused a huge collective outpouring for the loss of what is considered such a historic, iconic and religious monument. Interestingly, crowdfunding schemes set up to source money to rebuild the spire were met with mixed receptions; some people claimed that such money would be better spent tackling climate change or poverty. This once again highlights the differences in how objects are valued and how these are wrapped up in judgements, ethics and morality (see Chapter 3).

Nonetheless, what these famous examples illustrate is that collective loss of important cultural or societal 'objects' is very similar to individual loss and the idea that 'you don't know what you've got until it's gone'. Whilst these famous examples will always be renowned, they become more symbolic and hold more collective meaning because of the threat to their existence. We find more connection with them and more affinities to them as 'material', physical things because they are under threat. Of course, this is a wide-sweeping statement, and the reasons for why such 'objects' are collectively symbolic will differ – the Great Barrier Reef, for example, being prized for its biodiversity, Notre-Dame for its historical and religious significance – but a perceived threat to these earthly 'treasures' elevates their collective status and brings our affinities to them to the fore.

Collective lost objects

A further and more extreme example of this is when lost 'objects' become symbols of other forms of loss. Whilst the objects themselves perhaps did not hold huge collective significance when in existence, their loss acts as a marker of poignant events or eras, placing more emphasis on the lost thing. A tragic example of this is the Twin Towers and the horrors of the 9/11 attack which will always be immortalised by the loss of the World Trade Center. The collapsing of the towers, captured so vividly and screened around the world, is a symbol of the day the world changed and thousands lost their lives. Whilst many of us were not there or indeed may have never visited the towers or the memorial that now stands in their place, there is a symbolism and collective affinity to this loss felt around the globe. As one museum curator noted:

> …the twin towers, it's not there anymore, but there's a memorial there and we memorialise things that aren't there.

This quote points to the potency and power of 'objects' that are no longer there. Their material affinities stretch beyond their physical existence and long into our memories and imaginaries. Of course, in the instance of the Twin Towers, this is about the loss of the towers symbolising the loss of lives, but the lost towers have also become emblematic as a form of material loss, as a dent in New York's material history. Another example is the Berlin Wall, whose destruction symbolised a sea change in political history and the end of the communist era. As Bartmanski (2012), writing about political icons, notes, the Berlin Wall is the collective icon of 1989. Despite there being many other potential icons from this period, the wall and its collapse fulfilled specific iconic, visual and material criteria which enabled its status as a collective symbol.

Collective memorabilia: raving on

On a much more trivial scale, I have noted similar collective forms of loss through my recent work on rave heritage. As discussed, the Rave Project (see Chapter 1 for project details) explored the experiences of ravers who had been around for the 1990s rave scene and were still active in contemporary rave in and around Manchester. Emerging from the research were many discussions about the loss of particular nightclubs, and one famous club, the Haçienda, was central to many such accounts. For anyone unfamiliar, the Haçienda was a landmark nightclub of the late 1980s and 1990s and is often described as a focal point of the 'Madchester' music scene (Halfacree and Kitchin, 1996). Housed in a former warehouse, the club was renowned for being at the forefront of ecstasy use and rave music. Its hugely popular club nights, often including lavish sets such as a fairground, ice cream van and a swimming pool. The Haçienda was shut down by Manchester City Council in 1997 and was demolished in 2002 and replaced with apartments.

During the interviews for this project, participants were keen to point out how much they missed the Haçienda and what the building enabled:

> But there was something about it being uncharted territory, and fresh and new, that made it doubly exciting,
>
> (Professional DJ, female, 50s, Rave Project)

> And you know, it just eclipsed everything. And I kind of think 'wow'… that space provided for, you know the people who curated the bands to come there provided for that. And I think, if you were there them days, you were so lucky.
>
> (Music producer, male, 50s, Rave Project)

> … it doesn't come close to the atmosphere of the Haçienda. Because it was new, it was dangerous. And you take acid house and ecstasy and an industrial clubbing space for granted. But, up until the Haçienda, there was no industrial clubbing space. There was no ecstasy. There was no acid house.
>
> (Professional DJ, male, 50s, Rave Project)

These quotes illustrate the iconic status the club has in the lives of the participants, even now. In keeping with my earlier argument, a central part of this is that the physical loss of the Haçienda makes the memories of the nights spent there, in one's youth, even more poignant. Several participants mention the physical space of the building and its importance in enabling and conjuring the atmospheres of the Haçienda. Thus, the loss of the space is a means of reminiscing and thinking of times of old. Those moments can never be fully recreated, not just because the participants have aged and have new responsibilities and different lives but also because the very physical and material space of the club has gone forever. As one participant noted, 'when the building's gone, the Haçienda was gone'.

However, whilst the physical space of the Haçienda has been lost forever, aspects of the Haçienda live on in varying ways both materially and culturally. First, through memorabilia, or what I would term relics. When the Haçienda was demolished, the contents of the club were auctioned off for charity, meaning that people could buy parts of the dancefloor, the signage, bricks and even the urinals! So poignant was this that Chris Hughes made a documentary called 'Do You Own the Dançefloor?' (Hughes, 2016), which is all about the people who bought parts of the club and why such memorabilia is so important to them. Work on music memorabilia argues that material objects are a means through which 'individuals articulate their identities as music fans' (Bennett and Rogers, 2015: 28) This is often through objects such as flyers, badges or ticket stubs and these are more likely to be associated with particular current bands or musicians. In the instance of the Haçienda memorabilia, this is about memorialising a lost particular space and time, as well as celebrating a genre of music. Owning a piece of the Haçienda is about materialising a particular nostalgia (Holmes and Hall, 2021). Not unlike pieces of the Berlin Wall (Bartmanski, 2012) or mementos from the German Democratic Republic (Betts, 2000; Blum, 2000), including paper napkins, postcards and clothes, such memorabilia are a means of glorifying a lost past. They enable not just individual acts of remembering but also the creation of a nostalgic collective identity – in this case of being a raver at a very specific and important time in musical and social history. Linking back to earlier discussions, many of these objects are everyday things – what we might term everyday relics – with particular cultural and social significance. However, they are also about possession. The attraction with such memorabilia is that it is like owning a piece of history, a history relevant to yourself and a collective of others. Unlike the original space of the club there for all to enjoy, this is a relic of the past for personal enjoyment and remembrance.

Finally, it is worth noting that the Haçienda lives on collectively through its cultural significance. It is talked about, recollected and memorialised in anecdotes, stories and humour, as demonstrated through my interviews. The loss of the Haçienda is memorialised further through the use of the club's name as a brand for a series of contemporary events aimed at the older raver (Holmes et al., 2022). Haçienda Classical has been running for seven years and involves past DJs and music professionals from the original club, organising music events around the UK and beyond. This new brand, built on the old, has a huge following with packed-out stadiums of 5,000 people upwards. Part of its appeal is, of course, what it signifies, the lost club which for a generation will never be forgotten.

In sum, collective loss sits between individual and institutional forms of loss encompassing aspects of both. On the one hand, collective loss involves group memorialising and remembrance for the lost material thing. On the other, such loss is experienced in very personal ways representing memories of people, places and times gone by. As Kwint (1999: 2) describes, 'objects stimulate remembering, not only through the deployed mnemonics of public monuments or mantlepiece souvenirs, but also by the serendipitous encounter'. One way of coping with collective material loss, and all it represents, is through memorialising practices, such as memorabilia. Such artefacts and objects become proxies for the lost thing, filling the absence and holding numinous power to conjure memories and imaginaries. In the following section, I turn to other ways that material loss is managed, from other coping mechanisms to prevention strategies. Whilst material affinities are not brought to the fore in what follows, the efforts we go to to rationalise loss and manage and prevent it reveal the strong attachments we have to even the most everyday of things.

Managing loss

Rationalisation

Keeping memorabilia is one way of dealing with material loss, but my research revealed others, such as strategies to deal with loss which has already happened and to prevent future loss. Again, we can explore these through the different scales of individual, institutional and collective loss. In terms of individual loss, one way of coping with loss is to rationalise it. Many participants who had lost important everyday items described how they had come to terms with their loss and essentially tried to 'let it go':

> I try to sort of feel at ease with it thinking that, whoever stole it really needed the money for it. And whatever they got for that money, helped them. And I also think hopefully whoever bought it off the person didn't know it was stolen and it's being used quite nicely.
>
> (Participant Paul and his stolen/ lost bike, Lost Property Project)

> I try to minimise the annoyance from it, so if that means letting it go and thinking oh someone else can have it.
>
> (Kirsty, on multiple items she had lost)

> 'I always have this outlook that if someone else needs it…they can have it. If your life is that hard, take it mate'
>
> (Participant Mira, Lost Property Project)

As these quotes illustrate, there is a certain detachment from the lost thing, an attempt to severe the affinities the participant had to it. Mira further states that you need 'to detach yourself' from the object. For all three participants, rationalisation occurs by imagining the future life of the lost thing and hoping that someone else has found it and has created their own affinities to it (see Chapter 4 on finding). This almost philanthropic attitude, particularly on Paul's part, really surprised me during the research: this willingness to let others have something even if you did not really want to part with it (see Chapter 4 on circulations and Chapter 7). Imagining someone else getting enjoyment or satisfaction from one's object seems to be a means of coping with the frustration of losing it, the potential annoyance with oneself for being 'careless' or, in Paul's case, the injustice of something being stolen.

Prevention

Whilst rationalisation and collecting memorabilia are ways of dealing with material loss which has already happened, many participants, both individually and those representing institutions, also discussed strategies for preventing loss in the first place. In terms of individuals, such strategies involved trying to consciously make a note of where things are:

> So I always try and think 'I've got to physically pick that up when I go'. Whether I do or not is another thing but I do have that conscious thought of 'I'm putting this brolly down on the floor.' 'I am putting it somewhere'. 'I am putting it on the ledge'….
>
> (Participant Melissa, Lost Property Project)

Melissa tries to make a mental note of where items are so that she does not lose them. She focuses particularly on items – such as umbrellas – which are easy to leave behind when one is out and about. In a similar way, others described strategies such as having clear locations where objects 'lived':

> 'I've developed techniques for, like…I mean…so it's always coming into my flat, leaving flat, you know it's like, where do keys and wallet go… in London, outside of the door, we had this magnetic strip where the keys go…and then in the main living area there was a plate I would put wallet, receipts that kind of thing…'
>
> (Participant Steven, Lost Property Project)

> 'Keys, keys always hang on the rack…I'm very good at coming in, locking, keys on the rack, so I know where they are.'
>
> (Participant Melissa, Lost Property Project)

Having a set place for things was seen as a core strategy in preventing the loss of essential stuff such as keys, phone and wallet/purse. Another strategy, often discussed in relation to these same items, was saying out loud where you had put them as a means of somehow imprinting the object's location to memory.

Whereas individual strategies for preventing object loss are more ad hoc, institutional strategies are seemingly much more systematic. First, cataloguing is used as a means of trying to keep track of what the institution has in its collection and also where it is. This seems to be a process used across institutions, even though the standard systems or schema used differs depending on the institution. Cataloguing enables a record to be made and kept of what the item is and where in the institution it resides. As I discuss in Chapter 4, such records of objects are important for provenance and provide physical evidence of an object's material trace. However, as discussed, a core issue for many institutions is the sheer scale of their collections and the difficulties in keeping track of multiple, sometimes very small, objects:

> 'Well the museum has a huge collection so if you put something in the wrong place it can take you ages to find it. That's why you have lots of processes around when you move something you're supposed to record where it goes. It's quite a stock-taking exercise.'
>
> (Museum Curator, Lost Property Project)

> 'I mean, it's quite easy sometimes for sort of things to sort of be mislaid for a while. It's not that they're missing, it's that, if something… because often our kind of archiving system relies on people putting the locations, that they've gone back to the right locations, etcetera. So it just means that sometimes materials will be misfiled. And within that kind of archive system, I guess, that's not that uncommon….But we've never actually lost anything, yeah.'
>
> (Museum Curator, Lost Property Project)

Once again, with these quotes, the term 'mislaid' is used for items which are not in the place the catalogue says they are. This is blamed on human error or people not updating records correctly, as opposed to other reasons things might get lost.

For some institutions, cataloguing of everything is impossible because there really is too much stuff and not enough resources to catalogue it all. This seems to be a particular problem with archives:

> 'You don't necessarily catalogue every single object with an archive… we don't have everything catalogued.'
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

> 'There's a massive cataloguing backlog, in archives in particular. I think, it's going back a while but there has been various big cata-… like what's it called, like logjam or something, that I think there has been all over the Greater Manchester region years ago, where it was literally, let's just get a list of all the uncatalogued collections.'
>
> (Archivist, Lost Property Project)

As both of these quotes illustrate, cataloguing of every item in an archive simply is not possible. Indeed, as the archivist discusses, there is a backlog in archive cataloguing generally within the UK. This is due to a lack of resources to undertake such work but may also be down to how cataloguing and use of particular cataloguing systems have changed as archives have grown and evolved. This is picked up by one museum curator participant who similarly discusses the changes which have occurred with cataloguing processes:

> 'And then what we have for the rest of it is we have this stuff called documentation, so in this drawer we have about fifty specimens, or in this drawer we have twenty boxes because if you imagine, that's the collection, imagine there's a drawer, what used to happen was just because of how people are and the way stuff was done, people would start documenting a bit and they would do the bit they liked'
>
> (Museum Curator, Lost Property Project)

As the museum curator describes, 'documentation' is a way of cataloguing items without actually detailing each specific item. However, this has occurred in something of an ad hoc fashion in the past because people would document only the parts of the collection they were most interested in. In other words, they were swayed by the objects they saw the most value in and had the most affinity or connection with – be this intellectual or personal interest. This is something that Sharon McDonald (2002: 65), in her research on the Science Museum in London, refers to as 'object love'. This MacDonald describes as the passion that curators have for objects within their remits and advocating their prominence. This ad hoc approach to cataloguing therefore means that often institutions have only a partial idea of what they have and that cataloguing and documenting often occur in something of a haphazard and varied fashion. This leaves room for material loss to occur, whether this is things going missing or being stolen.

To further complicate matters, issues also arise because of different cataloguing systems for different types of items:

> 'So yes we all use different systems. So because there are different standards…so there's a whole realms of different…. So with cataloguing of books you apply one standard. There will be another one for archives, then others for museum objects and works of art.'
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

Just as there are differences between documentation and cataloguing, there are also very different cataloguing systems, depending on the professional standard applied for particular types of objects. So archivists will be trained in one standard, museum curators in another, and librarians in another. This potentially leaves room for error – or at least subjectivity – regarding where an object fits and the classification it should have. For example, what would happen to a book which is part of an archive? The librarian participant informed me that they had recently tried to overcome this by adopting a system whereby new acquisitions were catalogued by the person they originally belonged to: so anything in that collection – books, objects and records – would all be catalogued together. In this respect, items are therefore catalogued based on one particular form of affinity – who they were previously owned by.

Yet adopting new systems similarly reveals how cataloguing changes over time and how this creates further potential for things to go missing. As McDonald (2002: 73) discusses, labelling and cataloguing were issues of 19th-century museums' 'encyclopaedic' approach to collecting. By the 20th century, this approach to cataloguing everything in an institution was seen as too ambitious and impossible. Not only is this further illuminating of the 'crisis of accumulation' that such heritage sites are facing (see Chapter 6), but this move from trying to record everything has paved the way for different cataloguing strategies, providing further potential for object loss.

Finally, other loss prevention strategies are more aimed at preventing theft:

> 'so we have a certain kind of glass that we use in our exhibition cases, we have incredibly complex locking mechanisms…and then we have human presence, so there's invigilation and that's taken very seriously, whether it's for exhibitions or when people are actually handling the material in the reading room.'
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

Archivist: 'Yeah, when you're doing special collections, they weigh the content…'

Interviewer: 'Weigh it on the way back out?'

Archivist: 'Yeah. So just because, you know, that does happen… I think especially with… I know a lot things, they turn up… so you know, the whole procedures around that, I was just like 'wow, does that really happen?' It obviously does.'

Both of these quotes illustrate the various security measures that institutions have in place to try to prevent theft and ultimately loss. Some of these are focused on ensuring that objects are inaccessible, such as particular locks on cabinets or certain types of toughened glass. Others are to prevent loss of materials which are accessible to visitors, such as study collections. In the first instance, access to these materials often requires pre-booking and certain identifying credentials being given such as name, address, affiliation and reason for access. Further measures involve weighing of archives and study collections after visitors have used them or ensuring that they are accompanied by a member of staff at all times. Another measure is the use of replicas (see Chapter 6). Of course, as we know from the many stories about famous (and not so famous) stolen objects, these measures are not 100% effective and things do get stolen.

Conclusions

This first empirical chapter has sought to introduce the core concepts of this book through a focus on what is perhaps the most obvious form of the materiality of nothing: object loss. Examining loss at three different scales – individual, institutional and collective – it illuminates the power and potency that absent objects and materials can have and the traces and affinities that they can leave behind. Importantly, it illuminates how the loss of even the most mundane of things can leave lasting legacies – living on in vivid technicolour in people's memories. Perhaps the key takeaway from this chapter is the notion of 'you don't know what you've got until its gone'. In this sense, the loss of an object elevates its status and the material affinities we have (or had) with it. As this chapter has demonstrated, examples include the personal everyday items we really valued only once they were gone, any replacements never truly matching the material qualities of the originals, the perceived threat or loss of an iconic building or landscape exemplifying the collective importance of the lost thing, or how the theft or loss of part of an institutional collection emphasizes the importance of that collection and the need to protect what remains of it, however 'valuable' it is. As discussed, losing an object (or some other material features) leaves a gap, a haunting, an absent presence, a significant and experienced 'nothingness' where the thing once was. Often the circumstances and narratives which surround the loss only exemplify the gap and the 'nothingness' left behind. A nothingness we fill with material affinities – remembering, memorialising, imagining the lost thing. Whilst this chapter has focused on object loss and the devotion we have for lost things, the next discusses how we distance ourselves from objects in our possession.

3 Object Journeys 1

Starting at ‘the end’

In this chapter, I move on from exploring the lived experience of object loss and the material affinities it affords to considering how we distance ourselves from material things, both physically and mentally. Whilst this chapter is not strictly about absence, loss or nothing, it focuses on how trying to make an object ‘absent’ (nothing) from our lives is difficult and often fraught with anxiety. In its discussion of the processes and valuing of material things as they move along through our possession and into that of others, this chapter links closely to the next. We may think of the decision to remove an object from our lives as instantaneous, but as this research, and that of others (Evans, 2019; Gregson, 2011; Thompson, 2017), illustrates, this is far from the case. Rather, objects shift from different stages of valuation as they move towards disposal, and disposal is not necessarily where their lives end, as I pick up in the following chapter. A useful framing for thinking about how objects move through our possession is that of fellow consumption scholars Warde (2005, 2014) and Evans (2019). The 3As and 3Ds (brought together by Evans, 2019) are a means of understanding both the front end of consumption (how we acquire goods) and the back end (how we get rid of them). I explain these in further detail shortly, but the 3As are acquisition, appropriation and appreciation, and the 3Ds are devaluation, divestment and disposal. They offer a means of understanding how objects move through our possession. Yet, as I go on to illustrate, whilst the framing is undoubtedly useful, objects rarely move through our possession in a linear fashion, and not only is there movement back and forth between stages of consumption, but there are also moments of hidden consumption. This movement is entwined with our relational attachment to the object, to the connections and affinities we have with it. Furthermore, as Chapter 4 discusses, drawing on my work on the circular and sharing economies, objects often circulate, finding their way to new owners and new patterns of consumption.

Drawing on my research on lost property and my three-year fellowship on contemporary thrift (see Chapter 2), I illuminate some of the hidden moments of consumption alongside the more linear ones that the 3A and 3D framing accounts for. Importantly, this chapter focuses on the back end of consumption – so the 3Ds. Whilst this may appear counterintuitive, this is

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because to understand how things are acquired and circulated (Chapter 4), we must also appreciate how they are disposed of. Indeed, for many of the items I discuss, we first meet them only at the point of what could be termed 'disposal'. In exploring the back end of consumption, we unpick the material affinities we have with items which are moving towards leaving our possession. Alongside thinking about the 3Ds, I consider other moments of consumption. From the very sudden moment of 'abandonment' to the more lingering moment of 'disjuncture', when an object is forced from our possession, our material connections with objects and, in turn, their relational qualities which connect us to other objects, people, spaces and times are revealed. The removal of an item from our possession, be this planned or forced, sudden or slow, can reveal absences, spaces and gaps within our lives. As discussed in Chapter 2, disposed-of objects linger, their 'erasure never complete' (Hetherington, 2004: 168). Instead, objects and materials leave trace effects which continue to haunt us, be it unease about things we disposed of too soon or things we held onto long after they should have been thrown out. As Bille et al. (2010: 4) note, 'what may be materially absent still influences people's experiences of the material world'. As I go on to illustrate, objects continue to have effects long after we have decided to remove them from our lives and they have physically left our homes and possession.

A core part of this shift from wanting an object and it being part of our lives, to disliking it and eventually dispossessing it in some way, revolves around judgement and value. With this in mind, I draw on my work on thrift (Holmes, 2019a, 2019b) and the idea that the value of an object is often determined by a variety of different contexts and motivations and is by no means static. As Gregson and Crewe (2003: 142) note, value is circuitous, involving 'the creativity of social actors in shaping the conditions of value creation' and 'embedded in specific possibilities'. I argue that value is closely entwined with the connections we have with an object and that such affinities can change over time, changing how we value something. The decision whether to keep an object or dispose of it may be determined by the potential future value the item may have. This could be monetary value (in that it might be worth something in the future), use-based value (in that it is still operational/doing as intended), or taste-based value (it still suits the owner's desires and needs). It may also be determined by the perceived moral values and judgement of others. For instance, if and how we dispose of something may be influenced by what we believe others would think of us if they were aware of our actions and intentions (e.g. throwing away something that still has perceived value). Hence, the value of an object is often caught between external regimes of value (*is it fashionable? what would other thinks if we threw it away?*) and more personal and contextual circumstances (*personal taste, does it fit in our home?*) (Gregson and Crewe, 2003). As we see with items which shift between moments of consumption, value is an active process bound by both objective norms and subjective contexts. This valuation process extends to our disposal of items as we make judgements about the best and most appropriate way that should occur. Drawing on my work on plastic recycling, I illustrate how the process of disposal is often fraught with anxiety and confusion.

The chapter begins by introducing the 3As and 3Ds and their relevance for understanding our connections and affinities to material things. This enables us to explore the practices of devaluation and divestment in more detail and to illuminate how things shift between categories. Drawing on my work on thrift, I provide a framework for thinking about values and motivations and how these can be applied to moments of consumption. From here, I move on to consider transitional zones and how objects move in and out of transitional zones. Deploying both my work on thrift but also my research on lost property, I illuminate how similar processes and shifting between categories are at work in both homes and cultural institutions. Finally, the chapter turns to examine hidden moments of consumption, including disjuncture and abandonment, before considering how object disposal can be fraught with anxiety.

Introducing the 3As and 3Ds

The move towards examining consumption beyond the point of purchase emerged as part of the wider sea change in social and cultural studies during the 1990s. As discussed in Chapter 1, the 'rematerialisation' (Jackson, 2004: 172) of the field of consumption saw a shift away from research on the symbolic relevance of and status-driven focus on particular goods and consumption practices, towards a focus on the lived experience of consumption and how material goods became part of our everyday lives. Whilst many scholars have been influential in examining consumption beyond the point of purchase (Gregson, 2011; Gregson et al., 2007; Miller, 2002, 2005a, 2005b; Shove, 2003), Alan Warde (2005, 2014) has significantly identified key stages of what Hetherington (2004) refers to as 'the front end of consumption'. Building on this work, David Evans (2019, 2020) has countered the focus on the front end of consumption by paying equal attention to the back-end processes, resulting in the 3As and the 3Ds. The 3As describe how we acquire goods and services and incorporate them into our lives. Acquisition relates to how people access goods and services and relates closely to Warde's (1992) mode-of-provision framework. This is a framework which breaks down different modes of provision into market, household, communal or state classifications and then determines the normalised route of access/social relations for each mode, the manner of delivery, and the experiences of consumption. So, for example, a commodity acquired via market mode of provision (e.g. buying bananas from a supermarket) can be determined as being accessed via paying a price. The manner of delivery of the good is managerial, and the social relationship is one of a customer/consumer. Whilst a service acquired by a state mode of provision (e.g. accessing the National Health Service in the UK) would be accessed because it is determined as a need or a right. The manner of delivery would be professional, and the social relationship one of being a citizen or client. Appropriation is the next stage and describes how commodities are 'incorporated into people's everyday lives' (Evans, 2019: 506), what people do with objects and goods and how they become part of their daily routines and practices. Studies which have explored appropriation have focused on a plethora of things, including living room objects (Money, 2007), digital music technologies (Magaudda, 2011) and Coca-Cola (Miller, 2012). Appreciation is the final stage of the front end of consumption, and this focuses on the pleasure that people derive from goods, what makes people continue to consume things and make them part of their everyday lives.

The 3Ds mark out these same front-end processes but in reverse. So, whilst the 3As are about how stuff becomes part of our lives and homes, the 3Ds focus on how we get rid of it. And, as noted, it is the 3Ds which this chapter is predominantly concerned with. Devaluation is the opposite of appreciation and refers to when goods and services no longer meet our expectations. We might get bored with an item, it may break or cease to function as it did before, or changes in our circumstances may render it redundant. Divestment is the next stage, and this refers to the processes of mentally and often also physically distancing ourselves from the item. We may mentally decide that the item is no longer something we want. It might get moved out of its usual place to somewhere we cannot see it. This was a common thread in Gregson's (2011) work on ridding, in which divested items – ready to be removed and sent on – would be held in transitional zones and spaces around the home. Bin liners of items for the charity shop held in cupboards and attics and under beds constitute one such example (see the "Transitional zones" section). The final stage in the process is disposal – how people remove items from their lives and consumption practices, be that throwing something in the bin, taking it to the municipal recycling facility or giving it away (charity, friends and neighbours).

The 3As and 3Ds go some way in marking out our connections with material things and are crucial in providing a framework for consumption activities. However, as the following illuminates, they do not cover all moments of consumption, nor do they account for the shifting back and forth which can occur with objects as our feelings towards them change. Much of this is to do with the value we place on items and how such value can shift. I argue that this value is entwined with how we relate to material objects and the material affinities we have with them.

Processes of devaluation and divestment

We all actively and continuously make choices and value judgements about the objects and materials in our lives, be it how we care for them, store them or combine them with other objects in our possession. Take the clothes you put on this morning – did you assess whether they were clean? Did you give them a quick glance over for any signs of wear and tear? Did you think about which other items of clothing, accessories and shoes they went with? Maybe you did not give them a second thought, because a lot of this type of daily 'work' is automatic. What would you have done if you had found a stain on your T-shirt or a hole in your shoe? In some instances, you may have swapped them for something else. You may have thought, 'I will wash that T-shirt later' or 'I will sort out getting my shoe repaired'. Likewise, you may have thought about whether those items are still fit for purpose or whether they still meet your requirements as items of clothing. You may have started to devalue those objects and their purpose in your life.

This process of devaluation can be very slow – you might put up with the hole in your shoe or the stain on your T-shirt for a while, but every time you wear them, it irks you slightly that they are not quite right. You may try to get the shoes repaired or the stain removed, but it may not be enough for you to appreciate them in the same way as you did before the stain or the hole appeared. Their material qualities might not quite be the same – with the item not looking just right or feeling as it once did. Maybe someone else has noticed and mentioned the items, and normative values around appropriate and respectable attire start to play a part.

Alternatively, the process of devaluation may be swift. There is an issue with the item and therefore you no longer want to wear it. Of course, this depends hugely on the item and what is 'wrong' with it. Items of sentimental or financial worth are perhaps likely to go through longer processes of devaluation than, say, more 'everyday' objects such as clothing (although this is not always the case). A house, for example, is not generally an item which one devalues suddenly – unless it is beset by some major catastrophe which destroys it, such as a fire or flood. Rather, with items of financial significance, 'falling out of love' with something is a slow process, as the faults and defects you find in the object become more tiresome. Other factors may be at play, such as having the money to repair or replace things or, in the case of the house, the ability and resources to move. Yet, as discussed in Chapter 2, everyday items may also hold huge significance. The stain on your favourite T-shirt may remind you of why you value that T-shirt so much, what its unique material properties are and how you do not want to part with it. It may illuminate material affinities and connections you have to it. The influence and choices of others involved in the object may also affect your ability to act upon the feelings of devaluation and instead you may have to 'put up with it' for the time being.

Importantly, when we think of moments of consumption, devaluation is by no means a discrete, clearly defined stage of the back end of consumption. We do not stop devaluing something when we start to divest in it or when we dispose of it. To complicate the matter, once we start to devalue something, it does not mean we will continue to or always devalue it. As I discuss later, it is quite common for items to move from being devalued to being appreciated again. In the clothing example, fashions come and go, and items we may have long relegated to the back of the wardrobe (see divestment) may once again become popular and 'on trend'. Likewise, body shape changes may see us learn to appreciate an item of clothing once again. As I illustrate, the moments of consumption are interwoven, and it is this interweaving which enables objects to maintain their connections with us, even when they are no longer in our possession.

Divestment is the next of the 3Ds in the back end of consumption. Once we have started to devalue something, we may start to distance ourselves physically and mentally from it. The T-shirt with a stain may end up at the back of the wardrobe – out of sight and out of mind. It may get moved to a transitional zone within the home, such as a pile awaiting attention (e.g. mending) or a bag destined for charity. We may skip divestment altogether and throw the T-shirt straight in the bin. Again, the circumstances of how an object is divested and the length of time this process takes are complex and personal. They are bound by individual feelings and attachments for the item (e.g. the favourite T-shirt which was 'just right'); personal circumstances, such as having the money to dispose of the item and replace it; or the skills and motivation to attempt to repair it and re-use it. Added to this, again, are normative values and moral judgements about how items should be cared for and disposed of. Maybe we would feel bad about simply putting the T-shirt in the bin and might think of other uses for it, such as upcycling into another item or recycling it by cutting it up for cleaning rags.

Thinking about thrift

My work on thrift (Ehgartner and Holmes, 2022; Holmes, 2019b) is a useful detour here to explore the differing and often overlapping motivations which affect how people devalue (and value) and divest objects. As discussed in further detail in Chapter 1, this three-year project used a range of qualitative methods to develop a critical understanding of the landscape of everyday thrift. A core finding of this work was that thrift occurs as a constellation of practices and activities with associated objects. The constellation can be mapped as involving three overlapping extremes of motivation as to why people in engage in thrifty practices. These are financial necessity, conscience and enjoyment. Table 3.1 outlines these differing extremes. I argue that applying these more broadly can help us to better understand moments of consumption. Taking each in turn:

First, financial necessity is at first glance perceived to be about saving money, and much of the existing thrift literature would corroborate this (Evans, 2011; Miller, 1998; Podkalicka and Tang, 2014). However, through my in-depth study of the lived experience of 'being thrifty', I contend that, actually, financial necessity involves exhausting the value from the items one already has. The second motivation is conscience, and this is the most complex of the constellation extremes. Conscience covers a broad moral and ethical

Table 3.1 Constellation of thrift

Constellation of thrift	*Extremes of motivation*		
	Financial necessity	*Conscience*	*Enjoyment*
Context	Perceived financial need	Moral, ethical obligations, ideals	Hobby, pleasure
Who for?	Self/family	Environmental, health, ethical concerns, family	Mainly self/family but often gifted to others
Value	Exhausted	'Properly'/appropriately released	Added/produced
Types of activities	Shopping strategies – waiting for reduced items, shopping around, reusing, repairing	Reuse, recycle, re-purpose, no waste, reduce impact, ethical consumption	Upcycling, making, mending, transforming, gifting

Reproduced from Holmes, 2019b.

context, including environmental matters and issues of sustainability and waste (Elliott, 2017), concerns regarding ethical consumption and production (Hall, 2011), and health-related issues (Burningham and Venn, 2017). Needless to say, all thrift activities are bound by morality and the need to be doing the right and 'proper' thing (Miller, 1998). The significant point here is that conscience ensures that value is deemed to be released through thrift activities in the most appropriate and proper way. Activities are chosen that are deemed to have the least impact for the particular conscientious concern at hand. The final extreme on the constellation is enjoyment. Enjoyment has been somewhat relegated over recent years in debates around consumption and, to some extent, production. Replaced by more serious concerns focused on the need to understand how consumption and production practices impact on the environment, the pleasure associated with engaging in certain household activities has been overlooked. This is despite earlier work which illustrated the enjoyment found in activities such as shopping, do-it-yourself (DIY), making and mending (Campbell, 2005; Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Gregson et al., 2007; Miller, 1998). The constellation of thrift reveals how enjoyment is found through activities where value is perceived as being produced or added through engaging in a thrift activity. Often such activities involve making or transforming something, and enjoyment is experienced not only through the activity but also through 'gifting' the item to someone else.

These three extremes of motivation on the constellation offer reference points around which to explore thrift activities and (as I illustrate shortly), more broadly, moments of consumption. In the examples which follow, I illuminate how participants interweave elements of each motivation to explain why they engage in particular thrift activities:

Participant Debbie is a single parent to two teenagers and works several jobs to get by. In her own words, 'money is tight'. Debbie has noticed that her food shopping bill has increased over the last few years, and in an attempt to save money, she buys certain products in bulk, uses lower-priced supermarkets and sometimes shops online. Yet Debbie's thrifty shopping practices are also motivated by an ethical and environmental concern to reduce waste. As she states:

> I don't like wasting anything, yeah. There's no need. There's food, and there's people – that's what annoys me about supermarkets, I see people that don't have any food, really. And I don't like wasting money.

This quote illustrates how Debbie engages in thrifty activities to save money, but at the same time, her concerns extend to both environmental and ethical matters. Supermarkets are viewed as creating food waste, which to Debbie is problematic and potentially unethical when there are people who do not have enough food. For Debbie, the value of all food should be released 'appropriately' through people being fed.

Participant Alex, a married, retired teacher, was concerned about the environmental impact cooking had, noting how they would often batch cook/ bake – in particular, bread, because 'you're getting more for your energy' (this also implies a financial implication – saving energy means saving money). However, Alex also talked at length about the enjoyment he experienced from cooking and baking:

Interviewer: How often do you bake?
Alex: Twice a fortnight.
Interviewer: What for?
Alex: Well it's because you can give things to other people and they seem to like them.

Although Alex's overall cooking practices are motivated by his financial and environmentally conscious concerns, he also finds pleasure in these activities. Here, Alex describes how he bakes because he enjoys gifting the things he produces to others. Through this practice, Alex incorporates elements of all three extremes of motivation into his own personal thrifty context. Value is all at once exhausted (getting the most out of the energy used), appropriately released (not wasting energy) and produced/added (producing something to gift to others).

Whilst emerging from research specifically on thrift, these examples of extremes of motivation and their link to processes of valuation are useful for thinking about moments of consumption and what makes us decide to devalue and divest in objects. The extreme of financial necessity illustrates how personal circumstances may push us to try to exhaust the value of an item before we can even begin to think about devaluing it. Having the resources to buy a replacement (new or used) because an item no longer lives up to our wants and desires is not possible for everyone. This, of course, is highly context-specific – depending on both the item and our circumstances. However, the notion of contemporary society as a 'throwaway culture' (Cooper, 2013) potentially misses the nuance of certain circumstances and the relevance of particular objects. Whilst research on the single or limited use of items such as tents abandoned at festivals (Musgrave and Henderson, 2015) and fast fashion – whereby clothes are worn only a handful of times (Niinimaki et al., 2020) – suggests that people in the Global North have little regard for their possessions. My work, alongside that of others (see Gregson et al., 2007), illuminates a much more complex picture. Single use is a growing issue, but to suggest that everyone has the resources or desire to simply discard things misses the complexity of our relationships with objects. As illustrated in the previous chapter exploring lost property, certain everyday items have resonance and relational abilities regardless of their perceived financial worth.

Likewise, there may be conscience-related obligations around not simply getting rid of an item regardless of how easily and cheaply replaceable it is. As in the constellation of thrift and 'the appropriate release of value', we may feel it would be inappropriate to simply throw away the stained T-shirt when it still has value. This moment of consumption is essentially two-pronged: do we release this value ourselves (e.g. through further wearing and use of the T-shirt), or do we find an appropriate way to dispose of it so that the retaining value can still be released by others (e.g. give the T-shirt to charity)? The less environmentally conscientious choice in this scenario would be to simply dispose of it in the bin, where the only way that value is likely to be released is through energy from waste. This extreme highlights that there is a morality surrounding our abilities to devalue and divest in objects. Linking again to notions of throwaway culture, this morality is likely to be linked to issues of environmental conscience and the desire to do 'the right thing' for the planet. Thus, in this instance, the object ties us to a whole host of 'others': future others who might wear the garment and the future of the planet. However, there may also be instances where conscience around what to do with an object is related to other forms of conscience such as ethical concerns. For example, we may feel a moral obligation to hold on to an item which was gifted to us – the object forming an affinity between us as recipient and the donor. We may know that a great deal of labour has gone into making it – connecting us to the labour relations which created the object. Nonetheless, conscience plays a key part in our abilities to devalue and divest in objects, and it is bound by wider social norms and conventions.

The extreme of enjoyment on the constellation of thrift is harder to factor in. In terms of thrift, enjoyment is found via activities of being thrifty, such as repairing, upcycling and making. If we have enjoyed an object, we may find it harder to devalue and divest in it. We have made connections with it and may hold on to it, storing it in the transitional spaces of divestment (cupboards or wardrobes) in the hope that we may be able to use and value it again. This might be through finding another use for it through upcycling or repair, as I discuss next. Enjoyment is strongly linked to how we value something and indeed is akin to appreciation when we think of the 3As (and as discussed in Chapter 4). Enjoyment reveals our connections and material affinities to an object and its significance in our lives.

In sum, the constellation of thrift provides a means of thinking about and unpicking how we devalue and divest in an object. As I discuss next, these decisions are far from final, and items often shift between moments of consumption. It could be argued that the only final moment of the 3Ds is disposal. But as I go on to illuminate in Chapter 4, whilst disposal is often final in terms of our decision-making, to remove an object from our ownership and possession is far from final with regard to the life of the object.

Transitional zones

As I have already discussed (as has a lot of the literature on divestment), divested items will often remain in transitional zones within the home before the decision to dispose of them is taken. Yet the movement from devaluation to divestment to disposal is far from linear, and as I illustrate shortly, often items will shift between these moments as the value we place on particular objects changes. With this in mind, we can think of transitional spaces of divestment, such as cupboards, wardrobes and bags, as both spaces of opportunity and also a potential graveyard of unused stuff. Sophie Woodward's (2021) work on 'dormant things' illuminates how such divested objects may remain in our homes for many years before we move them along in some way. As noted, the temporality of such items held in these transitory zones is complex – related to the item itself but also our personal connections to it. Certain items may not reside for long. For example, Evans's (2012) work on food waste illuminates how perishable food leftovers may reside in the fridge for a short time whilst it is determined whether they can be used, (its value exhausted) in future food preparation. As Evans notes (2012: 1130), 'unlike other objects the lifespan of food is relatively short and so it reaches the rubbish category relatively quickly and once there, it is unlikely to be rediscovered, revalued, or enter the category of durable value'. Non-perishable items are likely to be held for longer whilst decisions are made about their fate, but this really does depend on what the item is, the material affinities and connections we have to it, and whether it has any perceived potential future value.

This is not always a case of 'out of sight, out of mind', though. Whilst we have all probably divested in an item, put it away somewhere and then eventually forgotten about it, some items have the power to haunt us (see also Chapter 5). As Evans (2012: 1131) notes, the divestment and disposal of food are 'anxiety-laden'. According to Hetherington (2004), objects held in transitional spaces have the power to haunt; their 'trace effects' affect us even when they are not in our presence. This ‘absent presence’ ensures that even though we might not be able to see such objects – having hidden them away – their presence is still very much felt, and there are ‘unresolved questions of value’ (Evans, 2012: 1131) about them. Thus, items held in these transitional zones, somewhere between divestment and disposal, are held because they pose both problems and potential opportunities. Their value has yet to be fully released or experienced, but there are questions about what to do with them and this causes anxiety.

Deaccessioning

To return to my work on loss in institutions, such transitional zones and questions of divestment and disposal are also at work here. ‘Deaccessioning’ is the institutional equivalent of household/individual divestment but in a much more formalised manner. McDonald (2002: 136), in her work on the science museum, notes how much ‘less was abandoned than added’, and this certainly seems to be the case within the institutions I spoke with. To divest in an institutional sense is laden with processes and systems very much focused on the potential value an item may have in the present for current collecting strategies but also may possess for future collections, as the following quote illustrates:

> It’s extremely hard to get rid of stuff as a museum, what happened in the twentieth century was that collection management became professionalised and maybe for up to some, for some good reasons, it became harder to get rid of stuff, like to give it away to someone you liked, that’s the distant past.
>
> (Museum Curator, Lost Property Project)

As this quote from the museum curator explains, the process of devaluing, divesting and eventually disposing of in a museum setting is bound by professional standards. As another museum curator noted, there is an ‘ethics’ to getting rid of things. Formal processes must be followed which assess the value of the item. As in the transitional zones of the home where devalued and divested items reside, such objects which have been highlighted as potential items for ‘disposal’ may linger for some time whilst decisions are taken and processes followed.

Even items which are broken or decayed and can no longer be exhibited (see Chapter 6) cannot simply be disposed of. As one museum curator noted:

> But even when things are broken and useless you actually have to go through quite a complicated process even to get rid of something so people tend to not do it.
>
> (Museum Curator, Lost Property Project)

This would suggest that removing things from institutions not only is complicated by set procedures and rules but also is bound by institutional anxieties. Not unlike the anxiety that individuals may feel around devalued and divested objects within the home, languishing in transitional zones and haunting us, anxieties around whether removing something from an institution is the 'right thing to do' also abound. Does the item still have value? Is it a reputational risk to dispose of it? As one librarian discussed with reference to a period when they disposed of multiple books, this was perceived by their contemporaries at other institutions as 'the wrong thing to do'. What future value may the item have? Of course, the latter is impossible to predict and thus anxieties are heightened because of the fear of getting rid of something which is later deemed to be valuable.

In part, I argue that this fear is heightened by a shift in institutional policies in the way that value is determined:

> We're moving away from that connoisseurial 'this is valuable because it's worth a lot of money and because connoisseurs say so', to a situation where an object or a series of objects will have value because of how they're going to be used.
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

> It's not necessarily about condition, it's about usability.
>
> (Museum Curator, Lost Property Project)

If value is no longer based on the financial worth of an institutional item and is more about usability, then it becomes more subjective. The future potential usability must be determined by the institution's staff. This undoubtedly places pressure on staff to make the 'right' decision about the item. Hence, as the museum curator notes, even when items are broken, staff want to avoid making decisions about disposal. Thus, just as items reside in transitional zones in homes, haunting and taunting us, so do they in institutions as well. In some instances, as I will discuss in Chapter 4, this might mean dealing with items by circulating them in some way to other institutions. In other instances, such as a decrepit wicker chaise longue which one participant told us was part of an archive but could not be disposed of, they may continue to reside in transitional zones such as cellars, where they are left to decay, haunting us with their absent presence and their continuous unresolved fate.

Provenance further complicates the process of deaccessioning objects in institutions. Unlike our household or individual items whose fate is ours alone to determine, objects in institutions have a 'custodial history'. This essentially charts where they have come from and is essential to determining their future fate. To be able to divest in an institutional item requires records of where that object has come from. This object history is paramount to what can happen in its future:

> So that is a case of, right, we don't think it fits any more, but we don't know who gave it to go back and trace it, and then the reputational damage that they might have if they deaccession something that belong to somebody who we cannot trace.
>
> (Archivist, Lost Property Project)

Without this provenance and appropriate records, objects cannot be deaccessioned. Therefore, they end up residing in institutional transitional zones unless they can be circulated elsewhere. This also raises the important point that the processes of devaluing, divesting, deaccessioning and disposing are twinned, if not overlapping, with those of the 3As. As I go on to illustrate in Chapter 4, stuff circulates – what is disposed of in one setting is acquired in another.

Moving in and out of the transitional zone

So how do objects make it out of the transitional zone? As noted in the above section, one way is through being circulated to other places and people. Another, of course, is through the act of disposal (although this is far from final and overlaps with circulating; see Chapter 4). A further option, though, is when objects shift back to being appropriated and appreciated. In each of these scenarios the relationality of the object is important. An obvious example of this is the revival of fashions, particularly clothing. At the time of writing, nineties fashion is making a reappearance and cropped T-shirts, platform shoes and boot legged jeans adorn women's fashion stores. Items stored at the back of wardrobes, under beds and in attics for 20-plus years may be brought out and worn again. This revival of fashion is nothing new: in the early 2000s, Gregson et al. (2001) detailed a similar phenomenon with seventies fashion. As Guffey (2006: ii), writing about revivalism and the notion of 'retro', contends, 'fads constantly cycle and recycle through popular culture, each time in a slightly new incantation'. Thus, it is feasible for objects stored in transitional zones to be re-appropriated and brought back into use.

Less obvious examples are kitchen items. Throughout my study on thrift, participants had items residing in kitchen cupboards which were resurrected and re-appropriated at different points as and when tastes or sometimes circumstances changed. Bread makers, food processors, soup makers, yoghurt makers, and slow cookers were just some of the items which moved in and out of transitional zones within the kitchen, as the following quotes illustrate:

> I've got a Kenwood Chef. I've had it since I was in my twenties. And I keep using it on and off for different things. I used to make cakes and stuff for the lads, but then they moved away and I don't eat cake anyway so it's not used very often for anything....
>
> (Participant Pauline, Interview, Thrift Project)

> So many of our friends got pasta maker when they were fashionable. Used them for a week or so, and now they live at the back of the cupboard only coming out once in a while!
>
> (Participant Ruth, Interview, Thrift Project)

As these quotes illuminate, kitchen gadgets regularly reside in transitional zones within the home. Often these items are described as being kept because of their unfulfilled potential value which at varying times would be released as and when these items were once again deemed useful. For example, participant Pauline discussed how much she used her Kenwood Chef food processor to make cakes when her children were younger but not so much now. Given their relative expense, to dispose of such items when they have been used only a handful of times would be deemed wasteful. Yet there are also certain attachments and memories to the processor, reminding Pauline of baking with her sons. Hence, they are kept, being re-appropriated and re-appreciated when circumstances change. This shifting of objects from what Thompson (2017: 59) refers to as the categories of 'rubbish' or 'durable' illustrates the flexibility of objects in transitional zones, able to move back into favour (re-appreciation, appropriation) or on into the realms of disposal. For Thompson, this is very much based on socio-economic power and who has the ability, knowledge and resources to categorise an item as rubbish or durable. However, I argue that my examples illustrate the movement between moments of 'appreciated' and 'devalued' that occurs within households everyday regarding very mundane items, and this is based on a range of motivations, one of which is about money.

Building on this, another form of re-appropriation and re-appreciation of previously devalued and divested objects occurs through upcycling and repurposing. Whilst the above examples detail objects kept in their original forms, upcycling and repurposing involve altering the purpose of the object to release and realise value in a different way – moving something from being transitional to being appreciated, or durable to use Thompson's term. Again, my work on thrift is useful here:

> This here is a CD rack. I was going to throw it out but it's the perfect size to hold children's shoes.
>
> (Participant Rebecca, Interview, Thrift Project)

> I mean that [pointing to a small bench] is the bottom of a wardrobe that belonged to my gran, and when I've not got that on [a big orange cushion], I've got a piece of wood that we made and polished and whatnot to put on the top of it, because it dips.
>
> (Participant Heather, Interview, Thrift Project)

As Rebecca's quote explains, the old CD stand is the 'perfect size for children's shoes', giving an object she no longer used or needed a new lease of

Figure 3.1 Rebecca's CD rack repurposed for children's shoes.

life (see Figure 3.1). Heather inherited an item which did not fit into her existing suite of furniture, so she altered it to make use of the value it retained and turn it into something she liked (see Figure 3.2). Particularly in Heather's case, this involved taking a risk with the object (cutting off the top part of the wardrobe) to ensure its continuation in some form and the connections through it to her gran to continue (see also Chapter 4). This could have ended with the object being rendered useless, perhaps so broken it is fit only for firewood. Thus, whilst these objects in their original form may be devalued and divested, further value is identified through their material qualities. Previous affinities to the object are sustained and new ones made as it is transformed into something else. For Rebecca, this was through using the CD rack in a different way; for Heather, it was transforming the wardrobe into something else. They offer further possibilities which enable them to shift back into the categories of appropriation and appreciation.

Hidden moments of consumption: disjuncture and abandonment

If we were to follow the 3Ds in a linear fashion, we would eventually arrive at 'disposal'. Along the way, our objects (the T-shirt or the shoes from earlier) may have been held in transitional spaces awaiting their next fate. They may

Figure 3.2 Heather's grandmother's wardrobe turned into a seat.

have been upcycled or repurposed into other things, but at some point they will reach the stage of disposal. Disposal marks the removal of an object from our possession. This may be into municipal waste streams if we throw it in the bin or take it to the rubbish dump. This may be via circulating it (see Chapter 4) in some way, such as through gifting or lending. Nonetheless, the key is that it leaves our possession and ultimately our control. However, disposal is also fraught with other moments which are not accounted for in narratives of the back end of consumption.

A main premise of the work which has illuminated the back end of consumption has been to reveal how decisions about disposal are not instant, nor are they anxiety-free (Evans, 2019; Gregson, 2011; Thompson, 2017). Rather, they illustrate (as do I above) that decisions to remove an object from our lives are fraught with anxieties around norms, conventions, morals and (importantly) our connections to the object. They also often involve changing our minds. So what follows may seem a little counter to such approaches which suggest that disposal is not a sudden process. Indeed, my work has found two moments of consumption when object disposal is sudden: disjuncture and abandonment.

Disjuncture is a moment which emerged through my research on lost property. As I discussed in Chapter 3, the loss of particular items would leave participants with a sense of jarring, a feeling that there was a gap in their lives, and a haunting by the lost object. Paul discusses his keys which he lost whilst out running:

> I do worry about those. Not worry, I do think where they are. They're just in a bog somewhere aren't they?
>
> (Participant Paul, Lost Property Project)

Paul's lost keys are a source of discontent for him, as was Steven's lost watch in Chapter 2. As discussed, such objects have trace effects; their absence is very much present in much the same way the divested objects in the cupboard haunt us. Only these are objects we have not had a chance to devalue or divest in. A sense of mystery pervades them, conjuring their loss into invisible material agency and creating a disjuncture in people's engagement with material things. The value of the lost item can become more pronounced because it is missing, creating a material 'gap' in people's lives. The option to 'divest' from an object – to mentally or physically distance oneself – is also taken away. People are forced to try to divest because the object has gone but are left wondering where it went and whether it will turn up. People's material memories and their connections to the object – the way something felt and looked as well as how it fitted into their lives in a way a replacement object simply does not – serve as a reflective vehicle reminding them of their loss and goading them into thinking about what has happened to it. In other words, disjuncture is a forced sense of divestment without the opportunity for devaluation.

Abandonment is another moment of consumption which emerged from my research on lost property and which does not neatly fit into the 3Ds. Abandonment often appears an unfathomable decision – objects fly-tipped (discarded in incongruous settings often by the side of the road or in rural places), nearly new goods disposed of in bins. This leans more closely to the notion of the throwaway society and the issues of overconsumption and abundance. In my work, the sorts of objects that people felt were okay to abandon and what this reveals about the moments of consumption and our relationships with objects were most interesting:

> So, we get a lot of umbrellas, a lot of gloves. We do get a few odd items occasionally….somebody once left a wedding dress.
>
> So, the lady came in to take some pictures, wedding photographs. We don't really encourage it, but she came in and she followed our rules, but she had two [wedding dresses] with her. Whilst she was here she changed between the two dresses and then once she'd finished she was walking out and she'd left like a dress on the side. And we were like 'what's happened here?'
>
> (Rose, Library lost property officer, Lost Property Project)

Juxtaposed with the very everyday and mundane items participants loved and lost in Chapter 2 are examples of objects which one would typically deem of high financial and sentimental value. These are items which we would typically have obvious affinities and connections to, but which were seemingly thrown away without a care. As the above quote illustrates, understandably, participant Rose and the other staff at her workplace were very surprised that an item as 'extraordinary' as a wedding dress would simply be left behind. What was really happening on this occasion – whether the woman was modelling for something and not really a bride, whether the dress was abandoned or lost – we will never know. Wedding dresses are normalised as sacred items (Friese, 2001), traditionally symbolic of a poignant milestone in a woman's life. Their importance and one-time use are similarly reflected in their generally high price tag; the average wedding dress cost £1,313 in the UK in 2019 (Pye, 2019). Hence, they are not the sort of item one would traditionally expect to just abandon. As Friese (2001: 53) notes:

> In many a woman's wardrobe, there is one piece of clothing that, having been worn once, is seldom worn again but is often highly treasured and especially cared for.

Historically, particularly in a UK context, following a traditional, heterosexual, Christian marriage, wedding dresses would be kept and stored, sometimes passed on in some capacity, by being either turned into children's christening gowns or given to female relatives to wear at their own weddings. In contemporary times, it is becoming more common for such high-end items to be sold on (see Chapter 4 on circulations), and some brides also choose to rent rather than own (Kwon, 2017), but many of these items will reside in transitional zones around the home for some time. Unusually, whilst these items may be described as somewhat divested – in that they are rested in cupboards, attics and other infrequently accessed spaces within the home – they are certainly not devalued. Rather, affinities with wedding dresses, and what they represent, are often displayed around homes in photographs, on screen savers and in other mementoes. This is why for someone to abandon a wedding dress in such a way is so incongruous with how one would expect it to be treated.

This seemingly 'careless' act reveals normalised assumptions about the right and proper way to treat particular items. Wedding dresses are not normally thrown away and abandoned like rubbish. However, I also contend that whilst we might view such acts as careless, immoral and unethical, they can also be steeped in anxiety. The need to get rid of something from your possession and not knowing the best way or even how you will get rid of it is an anxiety-inducing situation. The sudden, often covert process of abandoning something, leaving it somewhere it would never normally reside, in an incongruous 'out of place' location is at odds with the more gradual, layered process of the 3Ds. As Burman (2022: 273), writing about discarded toys, describes, 'abandoned objects' are 'dropped, left behind, out of place'. They are unsettling because of the 'presumed norms and practices around the place and placing of childhood' (p. 9) which would not normally include items such as teddy bears by the side of the road with their bodies missing (see also Bissell, 2009). According to Mary Douglas ([1966] 2000), such 'out of place' matter provokes anxiety not just for those involved in the intentional abandonment but also for those who find the incongruous objects (see Chapter 4).

Fly-tipping is a case in point. Whilst there has been little to no social science research on fly-tipping, studies available suggest that bulky items such as washing machines and freezers are the sorts of items which are most likely to be fly-tipped, and key drivers are a lack of access to transport to move goods to legitimate waste sites or the cost of disposal fees (Hodsman and Williams, 2011). The problem appears to have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and reports suggest that the closure of municipal waste sites during lockdown resulted in a 16% increase in fly-tipping in England (Harvey, 2021). As Ablit and Smith (2019) found in their study on street cleaners and abandoned objects and materials in Gibraltar, whether an abandoned item is considered incongruous and problematic depends on what it is and the context. 'Dead seagulls and animal faeces become "problematic" elements of a scene in the course of someone casually walking through it, whereas blossoms may not snag the attention at all' (2019: 875). Yet I would suggest that the anxiety felt by those coming across objects in incongruous places is often matched by those abandoning the objects, who may feel through a variety of circumstances that they have no other choice. This may be because they do not have access to municipal waste facilities or perhaps cannot get there or cannot afford the fees to get items removed. Thus, anxiety works in both directions where abandonment is concerned.

Of course, I cannot claim that all object abandonment is anxiety-inducing for those making such decisions, but what this does illuminate are the difficult decisions which must be made at the point of disposal. These are not decisions about whether something should be kept or whether it should enter back into the phases of devaluation/appreciation and so forth. These are decisions around how to dispose of something. The decision to dispose has already been made, but how that is done and the most appropriate way to do so are sources of anxiety and confusion. I contend that such decisions have become more fraught and anxiety-inducing in recent years because of the rise in options for disposal and a growing societal pressure to dispose of objects in the 'right way'. This, once again, connects back to valuation processes and how our consumption practices are motivated by a range of norms, conventions and personal circumstances. In the constellation of thrift, conscience – particularly environmental conscience in the wake of green ideals and policies – is a core part of disposal practices. However, there is also increasing awareness that it is considered ethically and socially unjust to throw away something that someone else could use. Thus, once again, affinities are at work ensuring that the object ties the fly-tipper to multiple 'others'.

Disposal anxiety

The sea change towards more equitable and sustainable forms of consumption has been emerging and developing since the late 1980s and early 1990s, and at least the environmental portion is traced back to 1970s and growing concern for the effects of greenhouse gases (Bolin, 2007). Positioned dualistically to the throwaway culture narrative so readily trotted out when thinking about how the Global North consumes, the growth in green or sustainable consumption has led to a plethora of policies and measures designed to limit the impact that society's consumption (and production) has on the Earth and its resources. I do not wish to summarise 50 years' worth of research with any further sweeping statements, but at the level of household disposal, this essentially comes down to an increased contemporary focus on 'reduce, reuse, recycle' (the 3Rs). Reduce consumption of goods in the first instance, re-use where possible, and recycle items which cannot be re-used. The 3R mantra has been incredibly productive in promoting the message that the Earth's resources are finite and the urgent need to move away from what Ritzer (2012) terms 'hyper-consumption'. However, on the ground, at the household and individual level, the 3Rs can cause huge confusion and anxiety.

My recent research project on plastic recycling – 'One Bin to Rule Them All' (see Chapter 1 for details) – has revealed this anxiety and tension around 'how' things should be thrown away. Whilst focused on household plastic waste, particularly plastic packaging, this project has illuminated the complexity of disposal and the challenges that many households face in determining the most appropriate way to dispose of items. Currently, in the UK, there are over 39 different household bin collection regimes across 391 local authorities (see Burgess et al., 2021). Contamination rates are high – in other words, the wrong things are ending up in the wrong bins. Some put this down to complacency and the well-worn adage of 'consumer responsibility' which scholars of consumption have tried to counter (Ritzer, 2012; Swaffield et al., 2018). However, our data suggests that this is caused primarily by confusion. Households do not know what should go in what bin:

> A lot of it is basically guess work isn't it.
>
> (Participant Joan, Plastic Project)

> To be honest with you, I wouldn't say it's a hundred per cent clear.... I think it's clear on glass. You know that goes in the black bin. Household waste, you know that goes in the green bin. It's more around... the yogurt pots or anything like that...
>
> (Participant Rob, Plastic Project)

> At the moment we have a list of things that can go into a certain bin, and a list of things that can't. And you're still left after four bins with stuff that, will you take this? Things like clothes, shoes.
>
> (Participant Clive, Plastic Project)

It is important to note that this study is focused primarily on plastic. Nonetheless, what it reveals is that the practices of disposal are fraught with confusion and anxiety even at the level of everyday household rubbish. Every household we spoke with discussed their confusion with regard to what happens to certain items and the 'guesswork', as participant Joan puts it, that goes into household recycling. Whilst local authority messaging goes some way in determining the preferred fate of particular items, that of others is unclear. Yoghurt pots, cartons, satsuma nets, pet food sachets, and bread bags were all items which caused confusion, and people were unsure which bin they went into. This can be blamed in part on a lack of clear messaging from local authorities and the multitude of different waste systems across different UK local authorities. For example, in the local authority we worked with, only plastic bottles could be recycled, and this is at odds with a majority of other local authorities in the UK which can deal with an assortment of different household plastic packaging, including yoghurt pots. Likewise, whilst recycling labels on objects are useful, they are useful only if that particular local authority has the infrastructure to recycle that type of item in the first place. However, a core issue remains that many of our objects are made up of composite materials – multiple materials which make them incredibly difficult to recycle. This can be seen in packaging with film lids, such as burger trays or pre-packed salads. The actual package can be readily recycled, but the addition of the film lid makes that process very difficult. Many households would not realise that they need to remove the film lid and dispose of it in their general waste bin before putting the packaging in their plastic bin.

Similarly, often the material properties of an object may be hidden (as I discuss further in Chapter 5), not revealing their true qualities to their owners/possessors. This may be because the owner/possessor does not realise what materials the object is made of. A good example of this is gift wrapping which appears to be paper but often has a plastic coating, rendering it impossible to be recycled in the same way that other paper products are. These hidden materials therefore make decisions about the 'right' sort of disposal incredibly difficult, resulting in confusion and, for some, anxiety. This confusion extends beyond household 'waste' to all sorts of objects and items. As participant Clive above discusses, he is unsure how shoes and clothes should be disposed of and whether they can go in the bin. The options for disposal are multiple and varied, from charity shops to repair cafes to numerous different bins. The 'right' and most environmentally (and ethically) conscious way to dispose of an object is not always obvious. Therefore, not unlike the objects stored in transitional zones around the home, disposed-of objects can also have an absent presence. Whilst they may have gone from our possession, the decisions we made about them can continue to haunt us. Did we dispose of them properly? In the right bin? To the right organisation? Could we have done something differently, more appropriate, with them? In the quotes above, the participants provide recollections of objects which they were unsure of, items which have remained in their minds after they have been disposed of. Thus, we remain – perhaps only momentarily, perhaps longer – connected to these disposed-of objects through such anxieties, and in turn they connect us and them to other people, places, norms and obligations.

Conclusions

This chapter has deliberately started at the back end of the journey of objects. In sum, it is about the relational power of objects to haunt us even when we no longer want them (or are not sure we want them). Objects haunt us when they are still in our possession held in spaces of divestment, when being disposed of, and when they are long gone. From our favourite T-shirt (the one with the hole) relegated to a transitional zone whilst we work out what to do with it, to the food packaging we aren't sure we put in the correct bin, to the flared jeans we regret giving away as they are now back in fashion – objects linger. As I have illuminated, our decisions as to whether to dispose of something and how we dispose of it are dependent on the connections we have to the object, and these are interwoven into regimes of value. The practices of disposal are fraught with anxiety about making the 'right choice', and that choice can be affected by a whole of host of 'others', which we may or may not feel connected to through the object. Out of sight definitely does not mean out of mind. The potent nothingness of materiality is very much alive in the practices of disposal.

4 Object Journeys 2

Acquiring, circulating, connecting

Introduction

Whilst Chapter 3 dealt with exploring the relationality of disposing of objects, this chapter addresses the other side and examines how things are acquired and importantly how they travel. As is hopefully apparent by now, despite the front end and back end of consumption as being positioned as such, these are not opposing sets of practices or discrete 'moments' within their own right, but rather they are very much enmeshed with each other in messy and multiple ways. The 3As – acquisition, appropriation and appreciation – are closely entwined with the 3Ds – devaluation, divestment and disposal – alongside other unaccounted-for 'moments' of consumption. Indeed, acquisition is very much about disposal and vice versa. To acquire an object, one must consider where it fits within our lives, what must make way for it and perhaps how we may dispose of the item when the time is right. Likewise, as I have already indicated and as I will develop here, the act of disposal is a space of opportunity for further acquisition, appropriation and appreciation. This might be acquisition by others as objects move along from our possession into that of others through varied means. It might be re-appropriation and re-appreciation of objects we have divested in and were marked for disposal – such as those discussed in Chapter 3. It may even be finding an item we thought was long gone and re-acquainting ourselves with it and re-appropriating it into our possessions. Again, this is steeped within regimes of value (Gregson and Crewe, 2003) and the connections and affinities we have to objects.

Like the previous two chapters, this chapter illuminates the connections and affinities that objects enable absent and present, from how they connect us to others (both people and objects) but also how they connect us to other places, times and imaginaries. In what follows, I focus on the broad practice of circulating and how things are moved along from one owner or user to another, be it through activities such as loaning, renting, donating, sharing and, more bizarrely, finding. In other words, circulating is a core part of acquisition and disposal, occurring as a 'flow' rather than 'discrete events' of objects and materials which unite and connect people, places and times

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(Gregson, 2011: 20). This fits closely with the growing body of research on circular economy. Indeed, my own work has sought to explore circular economy activities at the micro scale, examining how objects circulate between individuals as well as homes and within communities. As I illustrate, circulating is as much about understanding 'how' stuff travels and the processes of circulation as it is about who and where stuff travels to. Here, I expand on the notions of absent presence and haunting discussed previously, to explore not just how items no longer in our possession can still have resonance but also how stuff which has travelled to others contains traces and resonances of ourselves and former object lives. I illuminate how, through circulation, material affinities – be they the unwanted and often imagined traces of unknown others, to the memories, stories and imaginaries of family, friends and neighbours – are made apparent. I demonstrate how material affinities can be physical, imagined, ethereal and sensory, connecting us not just to other people but to other times, places and objects through their relational capacities.

In this chapter, I draw mainly on my work on thrift and lost property. I begin by discussing the practice of acquisition and how this can be both active and sometimes passive. I convey how acquisition is entwined with practices of accumulation and the processes of determining how an object will fit into collections – be these formal institutional collections or more informal personal collections of things. Building on the notion of institutional provenance, I then examine the myriad ways in which objects can circulate and how such circulations illuminate and bring to the fore material affinities. The chapter closes by exploring the practice of acclimatisation and how material traces and affinities are removed and worked with to enable smoother acquisition.

Acquisition: desperately seeking stuff

Given the focus on the 3Ds in Chapter 3, it seems fitting in this chapter to first pay attention to the notion of acquisition and what is meant by this. In keeping with the previous chapter, my approach to acquisition is to see it not as a discrete event but rather as a piece of the ever-changing jigsaw of consumption and the journey of objects. In terms of the 3As, acquisition is defined as how people access goods and services (Warde, 2005, 2014). In other words, acquisition is quite simply how things come into our possession, be that through ownership, borrowing or other means. I do not wish to repeat Chapter 3, but in a linear conception of consumption, this is followed by appropriation (how objects are incorporated into our lives) and appreciation (how we derive pleasure from them) (Evans, 2019). Similarly to the 3Ds, the 3As are caught up in regimes of value bound by objective norms and subjective contexts. Thus, in the main, acquisition is an active process which involves making value judgments not just about the object we are planning to acquire but also about how it potentially fits with other objects in our possession.

To return to our clothing example, we may choose to acquire a new item of clothing (be it brand-new or new to us) for a variety of reasons. We may be replacing an existing item because it no longer meets our expectations and has been devalued (think of the top with the stain in Chapter 3). The new item may be an addition to a planned ensemble of particular items, such as becoming part of an outfit. Or we may be acquiring it simply because we like it and want to own it. Hence, not unlike in the 3Ds, we can see how different motivations and values, from necessity to enjoyment, influence the activity of acquisition.

I argue that, in the broadest sense, acquisition is always about adding to a collection. This may be as general as adding something to our own personal collection of varied belongings or to the overall collection of an institution. Or it may be as narrow as actively collecting objects of the same type (e.g. stamp collecting, music collections, books and art) or some other denominator which unites items, such as objects from a certain period in time or a particular place, as is often the case with museum collections. The discussion on theft from institutions (in Chapter 2) highlights the relevance of collections of specific types of things and the relevance certain types of objects hold for people – sometimes to the point where they are driven to fanatical pursuits. As Belk (1995) notes, in this sort of collecting, items have a perceived special status and are part of a set. In my research on thrift, households often talked about having special sets of crockery or dinner services (see Chapter 6). These are set apart from the everyday plates and bowls in display cabinets or particular cupboards and are often gifts (generally wedding gifts) which have been cared for and added to over time.

In between these extremes, though, are other types of everyday 'collections' – which are not deemed special sets or necessarily significant from one's other possessions in any particular way. Such everyday collections might be loosely based on objects of a particular type and perhaps are stored in the same place, such as clothes in a wardrobe or music albums in a cupboard (Woodward and Greasley, 2017). What sets them apart is that they do not have special status as collections in their own right. They are not added to as part of an objective of collecting or creating a collection of particular objects; rather, they exist as an amalgamation of similar mundane things.

Active or passive acquisition?

Another way to reflect on acquisition and resulting collections, whether these are 'special' sets or everyday amalgamations, is to think of acquisition practices as being active or passive. Let's begin with the former: if we actively seek to acquire an object, we must consider where it fits in our collection – be that a collection of 'special' items in the Belk sense or a loose everyday collection, such as creating our perfect outfit or adding to our wardrobe. We might consider whether there is physical space, whether the item will coordinate with other items, and whether we already have something similar. As I found in my work on lost property, cultural institutions will often actively acquire objects into their collections through specific acquisition or remit policies:

> So we have a collective policy, and you'll find that for most archives they'll have… it might be regional, or it might be subject based, so obviously things like, you know, railway museums or like, trains, or railways, you know that kind of stuff, so it's quite common for them to have that collective remit. It'll be the case that if it's offered, does it fit within that collective remit? For ourselves here I think it has to go to an acquisitions group and I think we do some kind of evaluation in terms of how does it fit with other collections? Is there something we've got that's similar?
>
> (Archivist, Lost Property Project)

> So we judge everything individually, and in terms of, if it's something that's missing from our collection, and we have a collecting policy, and we kind of often sort of look for those check-list of things when we're looking for stuff.
>
> (Museum Curator, Lost Property Project)

Just as we as individuals make value judgements around the objects we want to acquire and actively seek, as these quotes illustrate, so too do cultural institutions. Decisions are made about whether something fits into existing collections and whether it is the sort of thing the institution wants. The archivist asks, is there something similar? In other words, does the institution need another of the same thing? Of course, there are also practical issues of space influencing these decisions, which I will touch on shortly. What these quotes illustrate, though, is the active processes of acquisition.

Interestingly, the museum curator also talks about things being 'missing' from collections. This highlights that institutional acquisition is also often about plugging the gaps in collections. Not unlike the clothing example I gave earlier regarding acquiring an item to complete an outfit, one pathway of acquisition is searching for absent things. These might be as mundane as the addition to an outfit or furniture to complete a room or as special as a core piece of an institution's collection. The absence or material gap of the missing thing, though, is noted and felt. Such 'missing' objects have a resonance despite never being in our or an institution's possession. This resonance is not unlike the 'gaps' discussed in Chapters 2 and 3: Joanie's pottery cat and Paul's lost keys. Likewise, it has similar resonances to the gap experienced by the fanatical collector from Chapter 2, who can only imagine what having the object they desire in their possession would be like. However, I would argue that this gap is not experienced as a loss, grief or yearning as in the earlier two examples. Rather, in the instances of institutional and everyday individual acquisition, this is experienced as a space of potential and opportunity. In the case of institutions, this is dealt with through the development of acquisition policies to ensure that such objects are actively sought through various means, whilst in the individual sense, we may just keep watch for the thing we are after (when shopping or online) and hope it turns up at some point and we have the means to acquire it.

I will develop this further in this chapter but mention here that whilst most object acquisition can be considered active (by the very virtue that we make decisions about the objects we want and seek them out), acquisition can also be much more passive. Passive acquisition is much more serendipitous. It is the bargain in the shop, the eye-catching item we had never even considered owning but are drawn to or, as I will discuss shortly, the item that ends up in our possession through non-monetary means, such as being handed-down, passed on or, more bizarrely, being found. In an institutional sense, passive acquisition might occur if an institution is offered an item through donation by an individual, organisation or, as regularly occurs, another institution. With all of these examples, there is no pre-planning or consideration of possessing the item; it is an unforeseen event. Of course, there is the option to actively refuse the item when offered or found, although there may be moral implications for doing so, such as offending the donor At an even more passive scale is what we might term 'accidental acquisition' – the company pen we filled out a form with which ends up in our bag or absent-mindedly taking someone else's umbrella, thinking it is ours. Thus, whilst most acquisition is active – in that we actively make decisions about what to acquire and how to acquire it – not all is. And what many of these passive examples illustrate is how stuff has a tendency to circulate, which I will discuss in more detail in the latter part of this chapter.

Accumulation

As noted, a core consideration when deciding whether to acquire an object is the practical issue of having enough space. In an individual sense, this might be enough space in our wardrobe or closet for a new item of clothing or pair of shoes. It may be having enough room in our home for an additional item of furniture or space in our garden for another plant. There are, of course, connections here between the 'crisis of accumulation' (Harrison, 2013a: 580), overconsumption and the notion that people, particularly in the Global North, have too much stuff. Collaborative and collective forms of consumption such as 'commoning' or co-housing initiatives alongside movements such as voluntary simplicity, right to repair and slow consumption aim to tackle this focus on personal accumulation and offer more sustainable and less resource-intensive ways of living (Botsman and Rogers, 2011; Caffentzis and Federici, 2014). This is developed further in Chapters 6 and 7. But, for the purposes of this chapter, the issue at hand is one of space. To keep acquiring, we need space, and that means either finding more space or getting rid of something to make room for the new thing. Once again, my work with cultural institutions is a useful case study here.

Lack of space in cultural institutions is a well-documented issue (DeSilvey, 2017; Harrison, 2013a). This is due to both previous acquisition policies – or lack thereof – and the need to ensure relevant acquisition for future audiences:

> We are nearly full so we haven't got a lot of space. So we have to be really careful what we bring in….we have to do due diligence in establishing that there is interest in this material, people are going to want to use it now and they're going to want to use it in the future. We've got to project into the future as well.
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

> We basically can't accept everything. And essentially, storage is a problem. And often we have to weigh up, if we've got a lot of things that are very similar within the collection…
>
> (Museum Curator, Lost Property Project)

As both of these quotes illustrate, storage is a problem within institutions, and just as we make decisions about bringing new objects into our homes and lives, institutions must consider the potential for future use, whether there is already something similar and this would be a duplication, and importantly whether there is currently space.

This notion of the future and keeping things for future audiences is an important and urgent issue for institutions – and also for society as we continue to add to our own vast personal collections of things. According to DeSilvey (2017: 4), the issue of too much stuff in institutions is due a shift in institutional acquisition practices since the late 19th century which have focused on the 'moral imperative' of preserving objects for future generations. This has led to vast quantities of things residing in institutional spaces. In part, as the institutions I spoke with corroborated, changes to acquisition priorities and policies over time have meant that certain types of objects have been prioritised and acquired which are then deemed less 'valuable' to institutions years later. This might be because they are no longer deemed historically valuable or of interest to audiences. Added to this, as McDonald (2002: 63) notes in her work on the Science Museum, collections are 'often pieced together from items inherited from elsewhere' rather than being curated from an overall vision or plan. This often means that large volumes of objects are not out on display, and some never will be. As one museum curator explains:

> What I should also say is that most of that collection was never put together to be exhibited in the live museum, so much stuff, it's all behind the scenes so no one gets to see it.
>
> (Museum Curator, Lost Property Project)

In other words, a lot of this stuff is hidden, invisible to visitors or audiences of the institution.

Not unlike personal collections, in all their forms, stuff gets added to over time, tastes change and we may find that things which were once prized end up in transitional zones where they are no longer used or regularly visible to us. I have already discussed the difficulties that institutions face trying to dispose of items through the processes of deaccession (see Chapter 3), but they must also face the challenge of ensuring that they keep items which are relevant for the future. This is, of course, a gamble, similar to the gamble of keeping a personal object in case it comes back in fashion or is worth a lot of money in the future (Thompson, 2017). The difference here, though, is that such objects may be the last of their kind. These dilemmas over what to keep and where to store things highlight that there is a real need for alternative systems of, or approaches to, accumulation. For DeSilvey (2017: 17), this is about finding 'ways of valuing the material past that do not necessarily involve accumulation and preservation'. I pick these ideas up in Chapters 6 and 7, exploring their relevance for wider consumption practices.

Here one final point, which leads us into exploring how objects circulate, is the institutional practice of accession. The opposite of deaccession (discussed in Chapter 3), accession is the legal process and paper trail which institutions undertake to acquire an object. Whilst I will discuss the routes of acquisition in both an institutional and individual sense in the following sections, the important point about accession is the emphasis placed on an object's custodial history, or provenance. As discussed in Chapter 3, not having adequate provenance can be an obstacle to disposing of an object that an institution no longer wants, which is why having this is essential when an institution acquires an item. Provenance enables an institution not only to formally and legally acquire an object but also to adequately dispose of it in the future, should they wish. Once again, this illuminates how acquisition and disposal are closely entwined rather than disparate practices; indeed, as I demonstrate, they are often all part of ongoing cyclical processes.

Connections, traces, affinities

Before I move on to explore how stuff circulates, the concept of provenance is a useful place to develop ideas around the connections that objects enable and how these connections travel. I have discussed in both Chapters 2 and 3 how absent and lost objects have trace effects, an invisible material agency which enables them to live on in our imaginations. Paul's lost car keys that he ponders years later, Steve's lost watch which he still misses and Joanie's lost pottery cat which reminds her of her grandmother are all examples of the absent present power of objects no longer in our possession. In Chapter 3, I introduced the idea not just that affinities are ties to people, places or times we have a personal connection to but rather that objects can connect us to multiple 'others'. Further broadening the notion of affinities, in what follows I illustrate how traces of others – be that other objects, people, places and times – are inscribed onto objects in multiple ways. Sometimes, such traces are visible, such as the marks of wear and tear by previous owners; other times, they are invisible but are nonetheless perceived, imagined and, in some instances, memorialised. As I explore, such traces live on in the materiality of the object and can affect how we appreciate and appropriate items into our collections, be they personal or institutional.

Provenance is a material manifestation of an object's biography – a paper trail enabling institutions to understand where an object has been and whom it has been possessed by. Without provenance, institutions are left wondering how the penny farthing bike in the museum or the rotting chaise longue in the cellar of the archive was acquired. As explored in Chapter 3, without provenance they cannot easily be disposed of. Whilst a legal document, provenance has the ability to shed light on the histories and potential mysteries of objects in a way that we never normally have with personal objects, perhaps with the exception of something like a used car which we may purchase with a log. Provenance adds details and accuracy to questions about where something is from, how old it is and who owned it before. Such information is essential, particularly considering more recent moves towards repatriation of items to their rightful countries of origin. As noted, though, provenance is not always available, particularly with older items without documentation. In such cases, so many of these questions about an object's heritage remain unanswered.

Work on object biographies seeks to address some of the questions about everyday objects that provenance answers about institutional ones. Undertaken generally with personal possessions, object biographies are a personal history of the object, in much the same way that we, as humans, have biographies. Drawing from Appadurai's (1986) notion of the social lives of things, object biographies narrate the experiences or 'lives' of objects. As I have written about elsewhere (Holmes, 2020), object biographies tend to fall into two camps: those that focus on the trajectory of the object and those that use the object as more of a means to elicit information about the biography of the owner. Follow-the-thing, for example, is a popular material culture method which fits into the former category, essentially auditing an object from its production through to its disposal. As Appadurai notes (1986: 5), 'follow the things themselves as their meanings are transcribed in their forms, uses and trajectories'. Such an approach has revealed the trajectory of papaya from Jamaica to London (Cook et al., 2004) and the movement of second-hand clothing from the Global North to the Global South (Norris, 2005, Tranberg-Hansen, 2005). In the other camp are those approaches which focus on the biography of the object as a means to explore the narratives of its owner. Cultural probes (Gaver et al., 2004) and objects as containers for stories (Digby, 2006) use such an elicitation approach, using objects to enable participants to talk about their lives. As discussed in Chapter 1, my own work attempts to find a middle ground between these two approaches – the former is very focused on the object, whilst the latter primarily uses the object to explore the subject. The method I have adapted (Holmes, 2020) involves thinking about both the biographies of the object and the subject. It asks questions such as how do the biographies interact? How do they differ?

Although objects have agency and the ability to 'act back', they cannot actually speak, so often our attempts to chart their histories and lives are only circumstantial or guessed. What this, of course, potentially misses are the traces which follow objects – the stories which surround them, how they are/were appreciated (appropriated) by different people, or their relevance in different places and at different times. Whilst we might think that such traces are applicable only to items of significant age which have had several owners or resided in multiple locations, they can be determined with mundane, everyday items and items which are not necessarily very old. As I illustrate, the power of objects lies not just in their histories and past biographies but in their imaginative potential – the affinities and traces they have the power to conjure. As with the previous two chapters, I use affinities, connections and traces interchangeably here, but it must be recognised that whilst many of the following narratives illustrate how objects connect people, places and times together and create 'affinities', there are also instances where they can create disconnect or feelings of unease. The traces are still there and present, but they may not necessarily be positive or connective. As I go on to explore, such affinities and traces are often revealed when things are moved along.

Revealing material affinities: moving things along

Circular practices

Before I explore how things move along and the traces and material affinities that this reveals, it seems appropriate to explain how I arrived at exploring the circulations of objects and the broader framing of my work on circular economy. I became interested in practices of circularity and sharing through my work on thrift. However, it soon became apparent that actually circulations of materials and objects had been a feature of my research since my PhD on hair (more on that in Chapter 5). Furthermore, whilst the discourse around circular economy is starting to be applied to policies regarding consumers, households and communities, actually circular practices have been a feature of functioning society since time began (see Holmes, 2018a).

Initially an industrial concept with the objective of making manufacturing processes more resource-efficient, circular economy has, in recent years, become another buzzword for sustainability. The need to move away from linear cradle-to-grave processes to cradle-to-cradle or symbiotic approaches has permeated sustainability policy across the globe. Circular economy is now deemed the best practice to achieve sustainable production and consumption and to essentially tackle climate change (Holmes et al., 2020). The European Commission now has a Circular Economy Action Plan (European Commission, 2022), including European Union targets on waste reduction, circular plastics and engaging consumers in 'circular practices'.

Likewise, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation is now solely focused on promoting circularity. This shift in scale in circular economy discourse from 'the macro power houses of manufacturing and industry, to the meso-level activities of small and medium enterprises, and micro-scale activities of the consumer and household' (Holmes et al., 2020: 63) has opened up further possibilities for social science research on materials and consumption. Everyday circular activities, such as re-using, redistributing, repairing and recycling, have been part of functioning societies for centuries. Often coupled with, or difficult to entangle from, informal sharing economies, these are mundane practices which unite neighbours, communities and, more increasingly, strangers through simple collective and collaborative forms of consumption. The contemporary difference is their recognition and organisation – both of which have been facilitated by the growth of the internet and the advent of digital platforms.

In the examples that follow, objects are circulated and acquired by people and institutions in myriad formal and informal ways, occurring between strangers, known others, family, friends, neighbours, communities and households – online and offline. In doing so, material traces, connections and affinities are revealed and brought to the fore. These may be physical traces of others visibly inscribed on objects, they may be recorded in accompanying documents as per provenance, or they may be imagined, embodied or memorialised within the object. Returning to discussions in Chapter 3, there are motivations and value judgements around items, particularly regarding decisions about disposal. Items may be circulated for reasons of financial necessity, consciousness around sustainability and the environment, for enjoyment or for sentimental reasons.

Organised circulating: gifting, loaning and swapping

There are myriad different organised forms of object circulations that I could discuss here. This could include second-hand provision involving a monetary exchange, such as jumble, car boot, nearly new and thrift sales whereby people donate or take along their unwanted objects to sell, or using the internet to sell unwanted goods through platforms such as eBay. However, I want to concentrate on object circulation primarily via non-monetary forms of exchange and through activities such as gifting, swapping and loaning. These activities can be divided into two forms: circulating between strangers or circulating between known others (although the level of familiarity may be quite varied). This is an important distinction for the sorts of traces that objects are perceived to have and the material affinities that they enable.

Perhaps the most obvious form of non-monetary circulation of objects is through the gifting of objects and materials to strangers. We can see this through numerous online and offline practices such as donating unwanted items to charity shops, listing objects on online platforms such as Freecycle and, on the more perishable end of the scale, gifting to a food bank or online surplus food site. Such organisations act as conduits for the redistribution of unwanted goods to those who want or need them. At a more extreme scale, we can also consider donations of bodily materials, such as blood, hair, organs or sperm. The extent to which such donations are gifts and occur between strangers differs, but certainly in a UK context the donation of blood is a gift (Titmuss, 1970).

There are obviously clear distinctions between receiving an object that was once owned by someone else, compared with receiving a physical, bodily part of them. Nonetheless, one of the key aspects of such circulations is the imaginative potential they enable. As work on reproductive technologies and the donation of eggs and sperm has illustrated, recipients engage in imaginative practices to construct an image or version of the donor (Hudson, 2020). As Nordqvist and Smart (2014) discuss in their work on reproductive technologies and donor-conceived children, these imaginative practices can lead to the donor being a 'ghost' within the family, an absent presence reminding the recipients of the donor's existence. Thus, here we see how materials circulated amongst strangers can conjure potent and troublesome connections. Of course, the difference in these instances is that such materials are often not visible – instead residing in the recipient's body. Similarly, in the case of donated eggs and sperm, such materials can and do become babies, leading to a whole different level of imaginative potential about the ancestry of the child (see Nordqvist and Smart, 2014).

In regard to the consumption of goods, this potential imaginative power can also be determined in everyday objects. Gregson and Crewe's (2003) work on charity shops reveals the imaginary and also visible, physical traces (of previous owners) that charity shop items are deemed to have. As they discuss (p. 155), second-hand clothing, in particular, 'requires the negotiation of this unknown other, his or her body and practices of wearing'. This might be as materially obvious as stains, perspiration marks or 'evidence of leakiness' (p. 155) on the item, conjuring imaginaries of the sorts of bodies and people who have worn the clothes. There may be no physical traces of the previous owners, but still recipients are left wondering about the imagined other. The threat and power of this imagined other are so strong that certain types of items, such as underwear, are not sold in charity shops. The perceived traces and contamination of such intimate items are deemed too polluted for further sale despite the sanitisation processes that items go through. Yet, as Gregson et al. (2001) note, interestingly the sale of Victorian and vintage underwear is permitted, as the items' temporal distance from their previous owners is long enough to potentially eradicate such bodily traces. Such items are also deemed to have certain 'authentic' qualities which overcome potential issues of contamination because of the 'imaginative histories' (p. 152) they are deemed to enable.

With the proliferation of more organised forms of gifting, sharing and lending of objects, the potential for encountering the traces of strangers is increasing. In the clothing example, the rise in platforms renting out clothes is a sphere of circulation between multiple strangers. Whilst this involves a monetary exchange and so is slightly out of the scope of this section, it is a great example of organised circulations of objects between strangers. Most importantly, such platforms are also novel and new, compared with traditional modes of second-hand consumption, such as charity shops (Gregson and Crewe, 2003), car boot sales (Gregson et al., 2013) and jumble/nearly new sales (Clarke, 2001). Such platforms have grown exponentially over the last decade, developing from existing rental models of occasionwear and bridalwear. As Henninger et al. (2022) discuss, rental platforms are attractive to tech-savvy and sustainability-conscious Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012), even though the extent to which they are sustainable is highly debateable. Whilst an extension of the occasionwear rental market (e.g. the wedding dresses from Chapter 2), such platforms do not tend to offer basic items, such as T-shirts of jeans. They instead rent out items which are higher-end and not worn as often, such as occasion dresses (Henninger et al., 2022). Such items will therefore have multiple people wearing them and potentially leaving their physical and imaginative traces upon them. Whilst the rental companies go to great lengths to explain how they remove the physical traces (see the "Acclimatisation: making stuff your own" section), the imaginative ones remain. Given that many of these items are designer and are often rented because people cannot afford to own them, such imaginative material histories might focus on the glamourous potential lives of other wearers, the places the clothes have been and the people they have mixed with. They may, by extension, be seen to imbue the current renter with the same potential glamour. However, they may also offer an opportunity for contemplation and – in keeping with a recurrent theme within this book – they may act as reminders of things we do not possess and, in this instance, can only experience.

Another example of platform-based object circulation between strangers is tool libraries. A recent phenomenon, tool libraries are based on the same principles as normal libraries but loaning out tools instead (Schor, 2016). The ethos behind them is to loan objects that one would potentially use only a handful of times in their lives, such as power drills, pasta makers and steam cleaners. Subsequently, they have both a social justice and sustainability angle – the latter because they reduce the need for the consumption of goods which are barely used, and the former because they enable those who would not normally have the funds to buy these often quite expensive items to have access to them. As in the clothing rental example, the tools which circulate between strangers from the library are likely to bear both physical and imaginative traces – physical in the sense that they may show marks of wear and tear where they have been used by others, and imaginative again in the sense of wondering who has used them before. They too may act as reminders of things we do not possess, and in the context of debates on austerity (see Hall, 2019), they may also remind renters/loaners of one's situation and position in society. In this example, we can see how the relational capacities of objects are not always positive.

The final example in this section focuses on swapping; in many cases, this involves some personal interaction with other users. This impacts upon the traces and connections that items are deemed to have. Organised swapping examples include food, clothes and even houses. In this example, I focus on clothes swapping, which was one of the case studies from my project on thrift (see Chapter 1 for project details). Although there are different models of clothes swapping, at the heart of the practice is that attendees are normally at once a donor and a receiver. The timing of this varies between different swap models, and some enable the practice of donation to be entirely separate from receiving; but in the one I researched they happened at the same event. This meant that swappers got to know each other a little and, importantly, were aware of who had donated the items they chose, and, likewise, who had taken their donated items away. Thus, the occasion fostered connections between attendees who would chat with each other and, in some instances, offer advice or encouragement regarding items that other attendees were interested in. As the host Rebecca noted, 'browsing and talking to other people' were all part of the process.

This connecting with others was important to the material traces that swapped items were then deemed to have. Rebecca discussed how attendees 'like to bring clothes or accessories that have been more special to them and are eager to see them go to a good home.' This often involved attendees discussing the biographies of items they were donating to the swap, and the reasons why these special items were being moved along were revealed. One woman brought along a peach-coloured Ted Baker dress with a bow on the front. Her mother had bought her the dress, but she felt it was not her 'style', preferring something more 'biker' than 'floaty and feminine'. Nonetheless, she recognised its value as a high-end brand and wanted to ensure that it went to 'a good home'. Another attendee bought a pair of decorative clip-on earrings, made in Spain and given to her by her mother-in-law. She loved the earrings but found them too uncomfortable to wear; hence, she wanted to bring them to the swap and ensure that they went to someone who would look after them. I took home the earrings, and knowing this little bit of their biography and having met their previous owner undoubtedly influence my feelings towards them. If anything, it enhances my affection towards them, as I know they were very much wanted but were materially uncomfortable for their previous owner. Whenever I wear them or see them in my jewellery box, I am transported back to that conversation and the reason they were moved along. Their material affinities are particularly resonant.

Although I present swapping in the previous example as having a positive effect on the material traces of objects as they move from one owner/user to another, other work has illuminated the negative traces that organised swapping can result in. Whilst not focused on materiality per se, the work of Schor et al. (2016) on different sharing economy activities reveals how micro-inequalities can be reproduced through swapping, and often these inequalities are grounded in the very objects and materials being swapped. For example, they illustrate how a food-swapping initiative with an ethos of giving people access to 'homemade, homegrown, or foraged foods' (p. 73) instead emphasized how only certain foods – those which were homemade and culturally appropriate – were deemed acceptable to swap. Thus, in this instance, the material traces of the food may instead serve to remind recipients of the food snobbery of such occasions and how their (or someone else's) offering was not up to standard. This is reminiscent of my work in food banks and food groups, as part of my thrift research, and how a lack of choice of the goods provided in food parcels only serves to emphasize one's position and lack of autonomy (Holmes, 2018a). In other words, the materials/objects become a proxy for one's circumstances; their material traces are reminders of one's current situation and difficulties.

Institutional circulation

Another form of organised circulation which reveals material traces and connections is institutional circulation. Not unlike the clothes swapping example, this generally involves known others, particularly in the form of colleagues at other institutions. As I discussed in Chapter 3, disposing or deaccessioning institutional objects is actually very difficult because of the various legal processes required. Circulating of objects offers a potentially different avenue for items which no longer best fit an institution's collection. As one archivist in the Lost Property Project noted: 'Your first port of call really is finding somewhere else for it'. This may be through donating an object to another institution or loaning it out.

In both instances, the provenance of the item (to whatever extent) is known – enabling the recipient institution some form of knowledge of its biography and material traces – be this whom it was owned by or where it was produced. However, there are also legal issues involved in this process, and many of these are about ensuring that the object remains in the same material state it was in when it was loaned out:

> 'If something is going out for display somewhere else the processes around that are extremely robust in terms of how you would work with that other organisation. So in terms of not just the security of the object but the preservation of it. So our Collection Care Team make detailed records of, you know, we take a whole set of photographs of what that object, the state of the object as it went out, and we do it again when it comes back, to see whether it's been damaged in any shape or form. So it's that idea of unbroken custody, that an object's in our care, and we hand over care to another organisation that will behave in the same way that we do. So we have very stringent systems in place.'
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

This segues with the forthcoming discussion on decay in Chapter 6, but importantly it also reveals that when objects are loaned to other institutions, they are handed a duty of care to its very material. This notion of 'unbroken custody' is as much about ensuring the provenance of the object as it is about maintaining and preserving its material qualities. In this sense, the material traces of the object are part of its protection. Given that loaned-out objects are also subject to specific insurance, their value and significance as objects and materials are also assessed and recorded, becoming part of their provenance and material trace.

The flipside of institutions loaning out or donating objects is being offered items by other institutions or by members of the public who are in possession of particular items. Again, these can be via loans or gifts:

> So at the moment, I'm in the process of trying to work out a deposit agreement for a collection that we know that is coming in, as a deposit. So it's going to be lent to us, but we know that on the death of the person that owns it, it will be transformed in to a gift. So what we are trying to do at the moment is to assess what its value is now, its market value. It contains stuff in it that could revolutionise a whole area of research, because nobody's seen this stuff before, you know, it's not been used. So through time it could end up being considerably more valuable.
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

This example is interesting in terms of circulations in that it involves a collection of objects entering an institution's possession as a loan and then being 'transformed' into a gift. However, what is also striking here is the significance placed on this collection. This comes back to the subjective nature of value. In this instance, a 'market value' is determined, but as the following line in the quote states, this financial worth is entwined with this collection's provenance and its potential ability to 'revolutionise a whole area of research'. In other words, its significance lies in its past and potentially future material affinities – the past material traces being whom it belonged to, what it consists of, and the fact that it has never been available before, and the future being how much it may be used and valued in years to come. This is, of course, not unlike the processes of deaccessioning an object (discussed in Chapter 3) and attempts at predicting an item's future significance.

If we unpick this further, as one institutional participant noted, items offered to institutions as either loans or gifts are very much 'cherry-picked', based on such valuation practices. In some instances, items may be highly valued and chosen because of very particular material traces, such as their connections to particular people. The following quote relates to an exhibition containing some very everyday items owned by a famous 19th-century American poet and bequeathed to the institution many years ago:

> But… so an object, and many of those objects that are in the show downstairs are quite 'ordinary' in inverted commas. Some of them are even copies of things. And yet, they've had this sort of disproportionate impact. Whereas, sometimes you might put something that was worth millions of pounds and deemed to be very important to a connoisseur on show, and it doesn't have any resonance at all…And this is exactly what's happened with the visual collection.
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

It should be added that objects in the discussed exhibition even included the lining of the poet's hat! Yet, as the librarian illustrates, these mundane objects had real resonance for the audience, more so than items 'worth millions of pounds'. Thus, in this instance, value is determined by the material traces of who owned the item. As the librarian adds, such objects become almost 'like contact relics' – their significance lies in their embodied material nature, as they once adorned the poet's head. The hat lining has the power to conjure an image of the poet wearing the hat. It is a material connection – an affinity – to him and his work.

However, such circulating affinities can be more than just associations to particular people. Their significance and value are determined instead by something much more material and physical than who has handled them:

> If somebody offered you a collection of books, they will cherry-pick in advance. They say 'we want these but not these, because we've maybe already got copies of those'. Unless there's a good reason, maybe somebody's annotated it in a particular kind of a way, or it was somebody's particular copy.
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

This quote illustrates not just how items are cherry-picked by institutions as discussed but also how in some instances it is what has happened to an object, how its very material has been changed or altered or what it is made from which gives it significance. In the example given, a book may be considered significant because it has been annotated in a particular way and this adds to its relevance. Other examples the librarian gave included books which were significant not because of their subject matter or who they had once belonged to but because of how they were bound, the type of printing press used to create them or, in some cases, the materials the book was made of. Thus, in these examples, significance is determined not just by what the object is or whom it belonged to but also by its very material fibres and qualities – how it was created, what materials were used, and (in the instance of the annotation) how that material has been altered and the layers of physical material traces added. I develop this notion of material layers in Chapter 5.

A further material trace which can occur through circulated, loaned or gifted institutional items consists of the connections that the object has to other objects. This links to the previous discussion on institutions identifying the gaps in their collections and actively seeking to acquire certain things to essentially plug these gaps. In these cases, significance lies in the material traces between objects: how objects form connections. This might be by having something in common, such as being owned by the same person, being from the same era, or being made from the same material:

> … an archive is kind of a composite of lots of related things, and the important thing that we try to do is maintain those relationships so that people can research them and understand them.
>
> (Archivist, Lost Property Project)

As this quote illustrates, maintaining and illuminating the connections between objects are core parts of an institution's role. However, there is an argument to be made that in moving on from being in the possession of one institution to that of another, the object takes its connections with other objects with it as it is circulates. In other words, the affinities travel with it. This might be connections such as to the other objects it used to reside with – in a drawer or a display cabinet. It might be how it was connected to other objects by era or owner or material in its previous home. All these connections make up the object's circulating affinities. If we think of affinities and traces this way, we can envisage something like a family tree of objects and connections or, perhaps in a more Latourian sense, a network.

Finally, also incorporated in such networks are people – those who handle the items and work with them and the traces they leave behind. This point was raised by an archivist who noted the embodied and intimate relationship that curators, archivists and librarians can have with their collections, knowing them 'inside out'. Similarly, it connects to McDonald's (2002: 65) notion of 'object love' (see Chapter 2) and the passion and care that curators can have for objects within their remit. Institutional staff would obviously do their best to avoid leaving behind any physical trace of themselves on an object (e.g. through wear and tear or decay), but I would argue that they have much more ethereal and sensory material affinities with the items. This is because the staff have a very specific tacit and tactile knowledge of the objects. This knowledge may be made material in the documentary records supporting the object, coming to light when such objects are circulated and moved on in discussions and paperwork around relevant insurance, or appropriate conditions (e.g. humidity and lighting) that the object should reside in. Whilst institutional objects may not be owned by those who work on and with them, this does not mean that such individuals do not leave their mark or, vice versa, that the object does not have a presence in their lives and that of the institution's – even when absent and they have moved on elsewhere. Thus, institutional objects can be both physically and invisibly connected to other objects, places, times and people by their material affinities and histories, and these affinities move with them as they are circulated between institutions. These sensorial and ethereal connections are similarly present in object circulations between biological and social kin, as I discuss next.

Familial and kin-like circulations

Having covered organised and institutional forms of circulation, I want to turn to explore more informal circulations with known others. This again draws on my work on thrift and how many of the households I spoke with, alongside the responses I received to my Mass Observation directive of thrift (see Chapter 1 for details), discussed the idea of passing on and circulating objects to family members, friends, neighbours and acquaintances. As discussed, it is from this work that the notion of material affinities emerged (Holmes, 2019a). Returning to the earlier discussion on value, the following reveals how objects often are passed on for a combination of motivations which include sentiment for an object but also because the item is deemed to still have some residual use value. In other words, it still works and it does not make financial (or ethical or environmental) sense to simply dispose of it. It should be added that these are not objects that one would typically deem 'special'. They do not reside in display cabinets or on mantlepieces; rather, they are everyday objects which are meant to be used. Similarly, these forms of circulation are not easily identifiable as practices of inheritance, or objects which can be defined as either keepsakes or heirlooms (Finch and Mason, 2000). They are often passed on between living kin and through kin-like associations. Through such objects circulating, their material affinities are brought to life, reproducing, imagining and memorialising connections, particularly kin and kin-like connections, in and through time.

One example of this is through items which are inherited but were not necessarily part of someone's will or estate. Rather, these are ordinary, everyday items which have been informally passed on. This might have occurred during the clearing of a deceased relative's home – whereby items not deemed significant enough to be mentioned in a will are allocated to or taken by particular family members. Participant Diana, discussing an inherited bread knife, illuminates how such items have material traces and affinities for her:

> She got it from her mum and it was her mum's wedding present… So yeah it's a hundred years old… I just really like it. I just think 'This is so old!' I know it's not ancient, you know, but it's how my mum held it, and her mum, you know. I've got some of those horrible plasticky ones, but they just don't feel as nice. I don't know.
>
> (Diana, interview participant, Thrift Project)

Figure 4.1 Diana's bread knife.

Diana's sentiment for the bread knife (see Figure 4.1), which has been in her family for over 100 years, is clear. However, this is also balanced with recognition of the knife's material value – 'plasticky ones' 'don't feel as nice'. Objects, such as the knife, are kept because of the affinities that they enable people to have to deceased loved ones (just like Joanie's broken pottery cat from Chapter 2) but also because they are useful. Another participant, Sandra, talked about the significance of a flour shaker which she inherited from her mother. The shaker not only acted as a reminder of her mother but, when Sandra used it, it reminded her of 'something mum and I did together … because I started baking with mum when I was five or six'. Thus, it is not just ownership or display of inherited objects which remind people of deceased loved ones but the physical act of using them which reconnect them with memories of those people and times gone by.

Interestingly, this physical use of objects as a means of reinforcing and sustaining material connections to kin is not limited to items inherited by one generation. This is somewhat counter to Finch and Mason's (2000: 154) work on inheritance and kinship and the argument that objects do not retain their special 'keepsake' status after more than one transmission because this requires the recipient to have direct personal memories of the original owner. Rather, my research reveals that often a second transmission or circulation of inherited items can act as a means of reinforcing and sustaining kin ties because of their passed-on, layered history within a kinship group and because of their repeated generational use. As Diana illustrates, the bread knife has the power to link her not just to her mother, whom she does have personal memories of, but also to previous generations. Holding and using the knife enable Diana to imagine her own mother but also her grandmother using it, forging connections with both regardless of whether she has personal memories of them or not. In the same way that Kramer (2011: 390) describes how people studying their genealogy 'experienced connectedness with their ancestors through the sensory experience of recreating their actions or returning to meaningful places', inherited objects which may be on their second or third (or more) circulations offer the possibility of tapping into layers of imagined and creative affinities with kin. Furthermore, such connections are made more accessible and imaginable through objects in use.

Another way that objects circulate between familial and kin-like networks is through handed-down items. This occurs between living relatives or social kin when items are handed down from one generation to another. My research found that a great deal of this involves everyday items, such as clothing handed down between siblings or other close family members of similar ages (see also Clarke, 2001), but also includes furniture and larger household items (see also Gregson, 2011). As the following quotes illustrate, this form of passing on is imbued with humour and warmth and the opportunity to reproduce family traditions and relive family jokes:

> When I was growing up we had second-hand and hand-me-down everything … It was a running joke in our family that during one of Grandad's slide shows the second youngest cousin would point to a photo of the youngest cousin wearing some lovely flared dungarees and say 'I wore those!' That chant would go all the way up through the cousins who had previously worn the same item of clothing.
>
> (Mass Observation Respondent: T4715, Thrift project)

> I have some furniture handed down from my grandparents… My siblings and cousins are amused that I haven't got around to replacing them, especially the living room suite which we all remember from gatherings at my grandparents' house.
>
> (Mass Observation Respondent: V3773, Thrift project)

As these quotes illustrate, handed-down items are significant in that they carry with them memories of family times – the flared dungarees celebrated through Grandad's slide show or the old furniture as a reminder of family gatherings; their 'handed-downness' becomes a quality of the object itself. These objects are inscribed with collective memories and family traditions. Their material affinities conjure connections of and traces to family times past. In the case of the dungarees, they no longer exist, but their material memory lives on; their absent presence is a feature of family reunions. With the old furniture, it is through its presence and continued use that memorialising is made possible. These objects operate as material affinities interconnecting the relational and material spheres to become part of 'doing' family. Their repeat circulation only adds to their affinity status.

However, it is not just items handed down between family and biological kin that have this potency to create connections and affinities. Many participants and Mass Observation respondents also discussed items which had been handed down amongst friendship groups and between neighbours. Again, often this focused on clothing, particularly children's clothing, but also other items, such as furniture and gardening items which were still deemed to have some use value left within them:

> I had a bike that had been around several kids on our street. It was simply resprayed and serviced…Once my younger brother finished with the bike it got passed on to another child on the street.
>
> (Mass Observation Respondent: T4715, Thrift project)

T4715's bike was shared amongst the street, passed from one child to another as each outgrew it. Whilst key reasons for this were lack of money to buy new and again recognition of the residual use value of the bike, this created a tangible material trace, a circulating material affinity between T4715's childhood and those of the others on the street, each taking their turn to possess the bike. Work exploring neighbourly and community reciprocity has looked at circulations of objects and services as part of the informal and second-hand economy (Evans, 2012; Gregson, 2011; Holmes, 2018a, 2018b; Pahl, 1984). Whilst not explicitly studying how these networks may or may not constitute connections, particularly kin-like connections, this research does highlight the vital role that the passing on of objects plays with regard to creating relationality. Gregson (2011: 71), for example, talks at length about certain households on the street she studied passing on objects between them, marking out their close relationship with each other and their 'social alienation' from the rest of the street. Likewise, Lewis (2018) discusses the importance of the circulation of objects for maintaining friendship ties. Thus, the bike acted as a conduit for relationality between those children and their families. It became a character of that street, its material qualities binding families together. Whilst we have no idea exactly how close respondent T4715 was with each of the children who shared the bike, this raises the possibility that through their circulation objects are involved in social forms of kinship; and a core part of this is their ability to create material affinities. Of course, the bike is now long gone, its physical material probably slowly decaying in a landfill somewhere, or long gone through incineration, but its material affinities remain.

Accidental circulating: finding

The final and slightly more bizarre example of object circulation and how it can create material affinities is through the act of finding and keeping an object which is not yours. Emerging from my work on lost property, this practice was actually more common than I initially thought. Often, 'found' items were not necessarily things of high financial value, or at least these were not reported to me, perhaps because of the morality, and also the law, around finding something belonging to someone else and not trying to return it to them. The old adage 'finders keepers, losers weepers' is technically inaccurate as 'Theft by finding', particularly where cash is concerned, is a prosecutable offence in the UK and many other countries. Whilst many participants discussed trying to reunite items, such as wallets and phones and anything else deemed of particular financial or sentimental significance, with their owners, other items were deemed fair game to keep. Clothing seemed to be one such item:

> Oh actually so one of my favourite jumpers was a lost item. I didn't mean to, it's so mine now that I forgot the story, so basically there's this skater brand in Manchester called Note … and they have like a bee on the back, like the Manchester bee … quite expensive … so basically I like really wanted to go on a night out with my friend … so I went to Charlestown, the tram stop, and I was sat there and like it was maybe 11.30 … so I was waiting for her to come up on the tram and I thought I'm not going to get this night out that I wanted, so I got on the tram and I lived by Forestwood tram stop … and as I got off on the bench there was this hoodie and then I went over to it and it was a Note hoodie and I thought even though I didn't get my night out at least I got this sick hoodie … I told someone and they were like aren't you going to try and find its owner, like put a post on Facebook or whatever and I was like no, like, finders keepers.
>
> (Participant Sarah, Lost Property Project)

> I don't know if I want to admit this. I did once find a hat … and it was quite a good make. And it was raining, it was dropped in a puddle and it was all wet and horrible, and I thought I can take that home, wash it, and I did … And I had looked around to see, there was literally no one around. I will just say that … It was like dropped in a puddle and it was manky.
>
> (Participant Melissa, Lost Property Project)

In both of these cases, the found items were on the street, seemingly abandoned by their owners. As in the discussion on fly-tipping in Chapter 3, these items were deemed 'out of place' by Melissa and Sarah; this is particularly true of Melissa's hat, which she describes as being 'manky' and in a puddle. Whilst there is an element of guilt in taking the items (as noted by Melissa's 'I don't know if I want to admit this' and Sarah's 'I didn't mean to'), these items are seemingly rescued from their abandoned out-of-place setting and incorporated into the lives of the participants. If we return to Warde's 3As (2005, 2014), finding and keeping abandoned items significantly disrupt the usual process of acquisition. There are no processes of exchange, such as money, barter or reciprocity, as we might expect in all of the other previous examples of circulation. Rather, these are objects without physical caretakers – seemingly abandoned, on their own and lacking in obvious connections to people. As with other circulations with unknown others, this leaves the finder wondering about the imagined other. Given that such objects will not have gone through the sorts of formal acquisition processes that one would expect from other circulations with unknown others (e.g. charity shops and rental platforms), such as visual checking and cleaning of items, their biographies will draw a blank. Indicators such as signs of wear and tear or perhaps a name or initials in a label may be all they have to go on as forms of material connections and imagined histories. As I go on to discuss shortly, this can lead to practices of acclimatisation with objects, whereby people go through rituals to try to remove material traces of others and make items their own.

Finally, it is worth noting the many participants in the lost property research who felt that certain items were meant to be found and circulated:

> But I think, items of, like, wool hats and umbrellas, those are just the sort of things of, like, if somebody on the bus needs that umbrella they can take it. That's passing on the good luck….
>
> (Participant Rose, Lost Property Project)

Umbrellas and other items such as hats were described by many participants as items which were fine for others to find and use. As one participant put it, 'there is a reciprocal umbrella relationship' – any left on public transport or in public places should be used by other people who need them. For Rose, letting others have an item was a way of passing on good luck and was a positive thing to do for anyone who needed one. This was often justified because of the unpredictability of the weather and the ubiquity and low cost of umbrellas. Indeed, this idea has been adopted by some organisations that offer customers the loan of branded umbrellas if they find themselves caught out by the weather when in their stores or offices. Similarly, some places such as railway stations and cultural institutions will put out umbrellas from their lost property offices for visitors to use during wet weather. The extent to which such umbrellas make it back to the organisations is unknown, but the principles of reciprocity and circulation are clear to see. This raises interesting potential for further sharing schemes of particular mundane objects. This idea is picked up in Chapter 7.

As this section has explored, objects are circulated in numerous non-monetary ways from organised forms of gifting, renting/loaning and sharing on digital platforms, within community groups or between institutions, to ad hoc practices of passing on between family and friends, to accidental forms of circulation whereby abandoned objects are acquired and 'rescued' from incongruous settings. Importantly, this breadth of circulation practices illuminates how acquisition is regularly not about monetary exchange and can involve multiple actors, objects and contexts. Moreover, connecting to the ambiguous concept of circular economy, this section demonstrates how circularity is already (and always has been) a feature of the everyday lives of individuals, households, neighbours, communities and institutions. Of equal significance are the material affinities which are woven into these circular practices and, in turn, are circulated – from both visible and imagined traces of unknown others inscribed onto objects, to the biographies and provenance of items and their ability to conjure both positive and negative associations, to the power of material affinities embedded in objects to conjure embodied associations, kin and kin-like connections and relationships to other objects, times and places.

Acclimatisation: making stuff your own

In the final part of this chapter, I turn towards exploring how people make circulated items their own and how they deal with the traces, connections and affinities that objects are physically and imaginatively imbued with as they circulate between owners. I refer to this as acclimatisation. Importantly, whilst undoubtedly connected to Warde's 3As (2005, 2014) and, in particular, the notion of appropriation, acclimatisation is a little different. As I illustrate, rather than just being about how people incorporate objects into their lives, acclimatisation is an active process of removing the traces of others or, in some instances, making something's one's own whilst still retaining the affinities that the object affords. Found objects offer a great example of how people acclimatise items into their personal collections of objects. Melissa's found hat is one such example:

> I properly like boil-washed it. Yeah whose head has it been on? I properly boil washed it. And I kept it for a long time. I wore it for a long time.
>
> (Participant Melissa, Lost Property Project)

As Melissa illustrates, she is concerned about the material traces embodied in the hat – as demonstrated by her comment 'whose head has it been on?' The potential that the hat has some remnant of its previous owner – be it their sweat, dandruff or some other 'contaminant' – drives Melissa to the rather extreme process of boil-washing it. Therefore, the act of washing the hat is about removing any bodily traces lingering in the material. However, there is also a symbolic element to this. Washing has long been described as a practice of purification, cleansing and rebirth (Douglas, [1966] 2000). By washing the found objects, participants are purifying them and making them ready for their new lives with them. This tallies with other work on charity shop and second-hand purchases where consumers describe the activities of physically and symbolically removing remnants and markers of previous owners to make an item their own (Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Gregson et al., 2007). Likewise, Shove (2003: 176), writing about how comfort, cleanliness and convenience are interwoven into everyday practices, notes that 'washing and laundering is represented as an exercise in restoring clothes contaminated through contact with sweaty, smelly bodies'. Thus, washing or cleaning found items not only acts as a physical removal of material connections to others but also signifies an attempt to symbolically remove and distance them from the object and also its new owner. Performing such rituals, as they may be termed, is part of how objects are acquired and appropriated into the new owner's/user's life. It is a way of negotiating and dealing with the tensions caused by the acquisition and appropriation of used goods. This is perhaps also why rental platforms (as discussed above in the "Organised circulating: gifting, loaning and swapping" section) are keen to point out how clothes and accessories are cleaned between renters (Henninger et al., 2022). To reassure customers, clothes are often dry-cleaned using high levels of chemicals to remove perceived 'contaminants' and traces of others, whilst accessories, such as shoes and bags, are disinfected. In some regards, this practice of cleansing the traces of others reminds me of my work on hair and hairdressing, which I will explore more in the next chapter on layers and leaking.

A further practice of acclimatisation is the upcycling or renovating of objects which one has acquired through some practice of circulation. My work on thrift and familial and kin-like circulations is relevant here. Several participants discussed how they had been handed down objects, often furniture, from family members and how they had transformed them in some way to better suit their own tastes and living requirements. Sharon's living room table is one such example:

> We've got tables that my dad made… you know the circular doors out of corner kitchen units. Two of them together on top, all painted and it's all white. We've got a massive table about that big, circular table, and underneath it's my dad's table!
>
> (Sharon, Interview participant, Thrift project)

As Sharon notes, her living room table uses a smaller table her father made as its foundation. Likewise, participant Heather (as mentioned in Chapter 3) made a seat from a drawer from the bottom of her grandmother's wardrobe. In both instances, these items have been altered, often through practices of do-it-yourself (DIY), to suit the needs of those they have been passed on to; but, significantly, the relevance of whom they once belonged to remains.

They have been acclimatised into the participants' homes and object collections, yet whilst their material forms have been deliberately altered, they retain the material connections and affinities they are imbued with. Hence, in this example, acclimatisation differs from a process of needing to remove or cleanse an item physically and symbolically of its material traces and imaginative histories as in the case of the found items. Rather, here it is about making an object one's own and fitting it into one's life but retaining the affinities and connections to others.

Conclusions

This chapter has redressed the previous chapter's focus on disposal and the back end of consumption to consider how objects travel and are acquired. Together, both chapters illustrate the relational power of objects as they travel back and forth through different stages of consumption and use. This chapter illustrates the relational potential of objects to enable connections with a variety of others and how material affinities can range from the very physical signs of wear and tear to the more imagined and ethereal connections we might perceive through objects previously owned or used by others. Such connections can be perceived positively and negatively – they may act as reminders of family times gone by, or they may serve to reinforce the inequalities we have experienced and the things we do not own. Importantly, this chapter has also demonstrated that whilst affinities can be reinforced and reproduced through practices such as memorialising and remembering, they are by no means static. Rather, affinities can be added to, lost, embellished and redrawn as objects journey from one owner/user to the next and as they move through different moments of consumption. So far, we have explored material affinities through three different lens of 'nothing': object loss, the practices and processes of object disposal, and, as demonstrated in this chapter, acquisition and circulation. In what follows, I move away from considering 'bounded' objects to explore how affinities are embedded within materials and the performative effects they can have.

5 Layers and leaking

The invisibility of materials

Introduction

So far, this book has focused on what might be termed discrete bounded objects and their abilities to conjure material affinities whether absent or present. Chapter 2 explored such affinities in relation to lost objects and the power and potency they have. Chapters 3 and 4 explored the tensions that objects and their potential movement or disposal can create. Chapter 3 explored the 'messy middle' of consumption and how objects move between moments of consumption, and Chapter 4 explored how objects circulate and the multiple material affinities, traces and connections (positive and negative) this can create. A persistent focus throughout has been on everyday, profane objects rather than the sacred or spectacular. In this chapter, I develop these ideas, moving on from considering bounded objects to paying more attention to the affinities and connections embedded and weaved both physically and sometimes imaginatively within the very material characteristics and 'fabric' of objects. Continuing with a focus on how objects and their affinities travel (Chapter 4), I do this through a focus on transient and invisible objects and their material qualities. Drawing on the notion of layering, I explore how objects and their very materiality can be multi-layered. This may be as simple as being made of multi and layered materials (as in my example of gift wrapping in Chapter 3) or more complexly as being imbued with layers of history and experiences both imaginatively and also physically.

In building on this, I also consider how objects leak. Making comparisons to work on the 'leaky body' (Grosz, 1994, 1995), I illuminate that not only do objects travel but so too do parts or properties of objects. From the visibly obvious fluff and fibres of clothing that migrate from one item to another, to the invisible microfibres that the same clothes leak each time they are washed, to the pet or human hair found in random, incongruous places – objects leak and leach. Drawing on the work of Gregson et al. (2010), I illuminate how materials and the objects they are part of have performative and transformative qualities. In the words of Latour (2000: 119), materials are not 'stable', 'obdurate' or 'boring' but have the capacity to change, hide and

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have performative effects on how we approach and deal with them. As I illustrate, these capacities enable objects and their materials to be sources of both enjoyment and anxiety.

In the eclectic kaleidoscope of topics that follows, the core aim is to think beyond the bounded object to how relationality occurs through the very materiality of things. The first half of the chapter focuses on 'layers', beginning with a return to my PhD research on hair (see Chapter 1 for project details). I illuminate the physical and imaginative layers within the materiality of hair. This paves the way for the second half of the chapter's focus on 'leaking'. From broken bits of objects to dust, to invisible microplastic pollution, I explore the relational and transformative capacities of objects and their matter.

Dealing with layers

We often do not think of objects as containing layers, preferring to focus on the things around us as discrete and whole. Of course, previous research tells us that objects are far from whole and discrete. Ingold (2010), for example, perceives objects not as bounded but as a 'gathering of threads', enmeshed in the flows of everyday life. In the most obvious sense, we may consider objects to contain different materials brought together to create the bounded object we see before us – the table, the chair, our laptop, pen. When something breaks and we are faced with the threat of it no longer being available (see Chapter 2 and also Graham and Thrift, 2007), we may start to think about these different materials brought together to create the object whole. If faced with repairing the object ourselves, we may even consider the physical layering of its materials. An example is the laptop, whose top panel and keyboard must be removed before the hard drive can be accessed. Other instances are those discussed in Chapter 2 on plastic, where we are unsure what material an object is made of and therefore struggle to determine the appropriate recycling fate for it. Is the gift-wrapping paper or plastic? Should the carton go in the plastic, paper or general waste bin? Thus, whilst we are sometimes faced with considering the physical 'layers' of objects to determine what happens with them next, generally engagement with objects is very much focused on them as being bounded, discrete and whole, unable to change form or alter. But as I will go on to show, objects do change form and alter – their layers may be peeled away, added to or transformed. These layers can be both physical and imagined, imbued with varying material affinities and traces. My work on hair provides ample material to explore these ideas.

Introducing the palimpsest of hair

According to Ingold (2000: 57), hair is always 'coming-into-being'. Despite being located at what have been termed 'the dead margins of the body'

(Kwint, 1999: 9), it is a substance which was regularly described by participants in this research as 'having a life of its own'. It grows, splits, snaps, gets greasy, goes grey – hair is always changing. Or, as Chris Shilling (1993, 24) describes, hair, like the rest of the body, is always in the process of 'becoming' (see also Holmes, 2015b). In the words of Bruno Latour (2000, 119), hair seemingly has the ability to 'act back'. It is a 'quasi-object,' 'much too disputed' and 'uncertain….to play the role of a stable, obdurate and boring' entity (Latour, 2000: 119). Uniquely located at the blurred boundaries of object/subject, living/dead (as the following quotes illustrate), hair demands attention; its transient, changing temporality illuminates its agency:

> Sometimes when I've had it cut though it just sort of does its own thing. It seems to have a life all of its own.
>
> [Sounds of agreement from others]
>
> (Lena, Focus Group 1, Hair Project)

> In any humidity it just goes like Monica, off Friends, not as frizzy as Monica's, but it goes big.
>
> (Ruby, Focus Group 5, Hair Project)

> I'll wake up in the morning and half will be stuck up here and other half will be flat to my head.
>
> (Vanessa, Focus Group 7, Hair Project)

As these quotes illustrate, hair is far from a seemingly stable, bounded object. Occurring at the boundaries of the body, hair is often deemed to have a life of its own; its vitalism is clearly seen and felt by the wearer/owner. From 'doing its own thing', to reacting to climatic changes, to changing whilst we sleep – hair has vitality.

Importantly, hair is also unique. One person's hair is vastly different from another person's – hair is determined by texture, strength, colour, degree of curl and so on; everyone's hair is different. Thus, the notion of the palimpsest is a useful lens through which to explore hair, not least because hair becomes ascribed with layers both physically and imaginatively. This, I argue, is like a palimpsest. The concept of the palimpsest has been used within many disciplines, including literature, archaeology, psychology and landscape studies (Bailey, 2007). The palimpsest's historical heritage lies in its definition as 'a parchment or other surface on which writing has been applied over earlier writing which has been erased' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2005). However, it has been commonly used in contemporary thought to describe 'something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2005). Hair offers a unique case through which to explore the notion of the palimpsest and the layering of affinities because of its transient and layered materiality.

Physical layers: betrayed by your hair

Perhaps one of the most illuminating findings from my project on hair was the revelation that hair stores within its fibres evidence of medication, drug use and chemical exposure:

> An interesting discussion took place about hair and medication today and how medication shows up in/affects hair. Parr described that in some instances it can be determined from your hair what medication you have taken. Someone else chipped into this, that this was how arsenic poisoning was determined, through the state of someone's hair. I asked if they could determine when the medication was taken by looking at which part of the hair was affected – i.e. nearer to the root more recent, nearer to the tip longer ago, and Parr thought they could.
>
> (Fieldwork Diary Extract, Hair Project)

As this extract from my fieldwork diary illustrates, hair physically holds onto the traces of medications and other consumed materials through its very materiality. It is well documented that hormonal changes, pregnancy and chemical exposure/consumption can all affect hair and alter its state (Mullaem and Rubeiz, 2006). Although these are invisible to the human eye, such traces can be found through testing. For example, hair follicle testing is deemed an accurate way of determining drug use and can even be used to pinpoint when the drug was taken (Kintz et al., 2006). Therefore, there is a temporal dimension to this – as hair grows, the physical, material evidence moves with it, providing a material timeline of the event in the wearer's life. Thus, hair stores within its layers physical traces of previous experiences and encounters.

Building on this, hair also stores within in its layers traces of previous hair practices. It should be stressed at this point that when I refer to layers within hair, I do not mean the practice of layering. This is a particular styling technique whereby layers are cut into hair and top layers are cut shorter than those underneath to give the illusion of longer, fuller hair. Rather, the notion of layers is used – in keeping with the chapter – to think about layers of materiality. Colouring and dyeing, for example, can produce a layered material effect within hair and affect subsequent hair practices:

> One of the first topics of conversation today was Linney's hair. It had been done over the weekend by Nina and Tina between them and according to Linney was now breaking off…I asked Parr and Beth why it would break and they told me that this happened when colours were overlapped. Parr explained that it was a bit like crayoning – the more you crayon using the same colour the darker the colour goes (or in this case the lighter – as Linney has tried to get her dark hair lighter and lighter in sections). Beth then added that, similarly, once this crayoning

> had been done it was hard to rub out – just as trying to then change your hair colour caused problems.
>
> (Fieldwork Diary Extract, Hair Project)

Parr's analogy of crayoning in this extract is a helpful explanation of how previous dyes on hair affect subsequent ones and is one of many examples from my time in the salon of instances where, because of the remnants and traces of previous colours, hair was not behaving as expected. Another example involved a client coming into the salon in tears because her hair was bright orange after she had tried to dye it from dark brown to blonde at home. Artificial colouring of the hair leaves a permanent record upon it, affecting how subsequent colours will behave on the hair. Like a dendrochronologist's tree rings, bands of colour can follow through the hair, indicating previous colouring processes. These various phases of colouring mix together, each time slightly (or in some instances drastically!) reworking the palimpsest. The more 'virgin' the hair (that is, hair which is nearer the root which has had fewer previous colours upon it), the more porous it is, and peroxide takes more quickly on virgin hair than anywhere else on the head. This can result in bands of different shades of brown, orange and blonde if a person attempts to go from a dark to a light colour. Thus, colouring leaves material traces which persist in the hair, affecting how subsequent colours will take (see also Holmes, 2014). This is also a way in which your hair can 'betray you', as I move onto shortly!

Just as colouring leaves persistent material traces which affect future colouring practices, so too can the practice of cutting. According to the many hairdressing professionals I spoke with during my research, cutting is a unique practice:

> 'It's like somebody's handwriting, everybody is different.'
>
> (Participant Heather, a former hairdresser, Interview, Hair Project)

I have discussed elsewhere (Holmes, 2015a) how hairdressing is a form of contemporary craft involving skilled craftspeople using virtuoso skills (Becker, 1978: 865) to do something others would find difficult. Cutting hair is a unique skill requiring precision and agility. It is such a skill that hairdressers can even tell when someone else has used their scissors (Holmes, 2015a). This is because – in keeping with Heather's quote – all hairdressers cut differently, leaving their own unique mark or signature in someone's hair. One way that this is in some way mitigated against is by what is known as 'following a pattern'. This is where a hairdresser will follow the pattern of the style left by the previous hairdresser or previous hair cut if it is a repeat customer. However, following a pattern is not always straightforward:

> Alana: This woman who I did the other week….Anyway she had a bob and I could not follow it. I thought "What has happened here?" So I said

> "Where did you have your hair done before?" She said "I always have my hair done here." …. She said Sophie had done it, "Then Beth did it. But I loved it when Clare did it last time, it was absolutely gorgeous!" And I thought I'm going to have to re-cut all this because I can't follow it.
>
> (Salon Focus Group, Hair Project)

As Alana discusses, this 'pattern' remains in the hair and either acts as a help or a hindrance to the person next cutting the hair. Therefore, not unlike colouring, haircuts and styles remain physically in the layers of hair's materiality. Whilst these may not be as visibly identifiable as the remains of colours, instead requiring a trained eye to be determined, they are physically and materially present in hair's layers. To be able to move on and restyle the hair requires an understanding of the previous patterns stored within its layers.

In this respect, the layers of hair's materiality can give us away – as when we try to perform a hair practice at home, such as cutting our fringe or home dyeing, or perhaps are unfaithful to our usual hairdresser and go elsewhere:

> One important thing to note about today was something Nina said to Parr about a client which stuck in my mind. She was commenting on the state of a customer's hair who I believe had been in before. She told him that the woman had tufts of hair around her forehead because she had done something to it (I believe coloured it and it had broken off – but it may have been cutting). She then said "Well that's what you get when you mess with your own hair." This struck me as pertinent because Nina was almost saying if you mess with your hair, and don't leave it to the professionals then it will end up in a mess.
>
> (Fieldwork Diary Extract, Hair Project)

Whilst there is something interesting in this fieldwork extract about whose role it is to maintain hair (which I will discuss briefly next), this also illuminates how hair has the ability to silently narrate its history – to give us and the practices we engage in away. In this instance, the customer in the extract has done something with her hair which has caused it to break off – leaving it visible to the hairdresser that she had undertaken colouring or cutting herself at home or has gone elsewhere. Thus, the palimpsest remains a material record – to pick up on Chapters 3 and 4 – a provenance or biography which details the layers of previous hair practices.

Maintaining the traces: working on the coherent 'self'

The colouring and cutting examples discussed reveal how previous efforts to maintain one's hair are woven into hair's very materiality. Like a palimpsest, layers of previous hair practices can be identified. These in turn effect what can happen next to hair, whether that be hair's capacity to be dyed a certain colour or the hairdresser's ability to follow a previous pattern of a style. In sum, the layers of hair's materiality affect how hair is maintained. To return to Shilling (1993: 24), 'the body, is always in the process of 'becoming'' and so is hair. Alongside the layers of previous hair practices, hair is continually changing and growing, hence the repeat visits to the hairdresser to trim hair to retain its style or to colour roots. As Mol and Law (2004) conclude in their work on managing hypoglycaemia, the body is never whole and work must be continually done to stabilise the body's boundaries and maintain the coherent self. This is the self we produce for others, our identity and self-presentation, but it is also the self which enables us to feel and look like us. As my research illustrated, hair is a huge part of this, and numerous participants refer to hair looking and feeling 'right' and the difficulties in achieving this:

> It's due to be cut and I can really tell. It's really out of style. It's driving me mad at the moment.... It's all behind my ears tonight. I've got loads of hair here and I've just had to wet it down and put it all behind my ears.
>
> (Nancy, Focus Group 7, Hair Project)

> Just whenever it starts annoying me or I feel like it's not going right, I book an appointment.
>
> (Margaret, Focus Group 2, Hair Project)

> I don't have mine coloured, but if I was going on holiday and Diana had only cut it, say, five weeks before, I'd make her come and do it again. Just so that it looks alright.
>
> (Samantha, Focus Group 8, Hair Project)

As these quotes demonstrate, hair feeling 'right' is important to maintaining the coherent self. Hair's material excessiveness not only is visible but also, importantly, is felt. Itching, irritating and failing to co-operate all disrupt the 'coherent self' and the ability to feel in control of one's identity (Holmes, 2014). Our attempts at stabilising the coherent self are perpetually threatened by hair's vitality; hair grows, gets greasy and is affected by the weather, but added to this, we must consider the layers of the palimpsest and their ability to 'act back'.

The hairdresser adds another layer to the production of the 'coherent self'. Tasked with dealing with the layers of hair's materiality, whilst attempting to create the versions of ourselves we are so particular about, the hairdresser does not have an easy role. This is perhaps why hairdressers may become perturbed when a client 'messes' with their own hair and affects the layers of the palimpsest. Indeed, hairdressers were often referred to throughout the project as 'magicians' with special powers to tame and control hair. This raises an interesting quandary – who has the power to deal with hair and perform certain practices upon it? Of course, ultimately, it is up to the wearer/owner what they do with their hair, but both client and hairdresser participants spoke about hair as being, in part, the responsibility of the hairdresser. This leads me to imaginative traces and affinities woven into the layers of hair's materiality.

Imaginative traces

> She did not own the worsted on which she worked; it was never hers, neither in bundle form nor after she had exercised her energies on the bundles, mingled her labour with its greasy mass, and turned it into a commodity –yarn- for sale. It was lent her, loaned her, given to her on trust, for payment that came only after the labour was complete.
>
> (Steedman, 2007: 42)

This quote from Carolyn's Steedman's (2007) work on the English industrial age describes how 18th-century maid servant and worsted spinner, Phoebe Beeston, tended to the wool fibres she was 'loaned', turning them into yarn. Beeston was a temporary guardian of the fibres, working and changing them but having no ownership over them. This quote could also easily be written about hairdressers – depicting the transient and intermittent responsibility that hairdresser's have for customers' hair. As Stewart (1999: 30), writing about memory and touch, discusses, 'materials store our labour and our maintenance' and so the hairdresser's labour is stored in the customer's hair. Whilst this may be physically and materially visible, such as the newly coiffed salon-produced blow wave, it is also imaginative.

The influence of the hairdresser and their labour residing in one's hair were discussed by many participants (see also Holmes, 2018b):

> Cos I get my eyebrows done in the same place, her sister does them, and there's a few times I've gone in and just felt ashamed because my hair's been that much of a mess. And I always feel like I have to apologise to her….cos they're trying to make it look nice, and you think I'm not doing very well here, or a good job of keeping up what you've done.
>
> (Jennifer, Interview, Hair Project)

> Erm you feel a bit guilty if they've spent ages doing it nice and then you have it scrapped back, you know and the damage you do.
>
> (Eileen, Interview, Hair Project)

As Jennifer and Eileen convey, there is an expectation that they will maintain the hairdresser's labour and effort once they have left the hair salon. Failing to do so, as in these examples, results in feelings of guilt, anxiety and inadequacy about their efforts. This notion of maintaining the hairdresser's work was especially prominent with participants who were regular customers – in other words, they were aware that at some point they would have to go back and how they had been caring (or not caring) for their hair would be displayed and judged. Given that being a repeat customer is a significant feature of hairdressing – particularly, female hairdressing (Holmes, 2018b) – this is likely to be a common occurrence. One participant was so concerned with how her hairdresser would perceive her maintenance of her hair between appointments that she would always wash her hair at home before visiting the salon to demonstrate that she was 'taking care' of it. As Stevenson (2001: 149) corroborates, the hairdresser 'creates work for the consumer in their daily production and maintenance of the style, as well as future work for themselves'. Thus, the hairdresser and their labour are stored both physically and imaginatively in hair's material layers – physically in terms of the changes they make to the customer's hair (the cut, the colour, the style) but also imaginatively through the customer being conscious of the hairdresser and what they will think of how the hair is being managed. Such imaginative traces are also apparent in the earlier discussion regarding Alana being unable to follow the pattern of a previous hairdresser. Whilst this is physically manifested in the material of hair, the previous hairdresser becomes an unknown imaginative other captured within the layers of hair's materiality and taunts Alana, making it difficult for her to cut the hair into the client's desired style.

Whilst hair provides a useful lens through which to explore how material affinities can be layered into objects and their material qualities (as I have illustrated), hair is a unique case study. Located at the dead margins of the body yet ascribed with vitality and potency – hair is undoubtedly more transient, lively and changeable than many other objects and materials; its bodily status affords it very particular corporeal characteristics. In turn, this affords a distinct set of affinities uniting the wearer and their hairdresser with particular past practices and people both physically and imaginatively. Other potentially comparative examples might include other bodily materials and practices such as nails or skincare, or other transient 'objects' and their practices such as food and food production (I am thinking of foods with long production times, such as aged forms of alcohol or cheese which require sustained/repeat input) and gardens and horticulture which must be maintained.

Nonetheless, the notion of material affinities being ascribed to layers within objects can be applied to numerous objects. We can consider the circulated, upcycled furniture in Chapter 4 to be a form of contemporary palimpsest – and different layers are inscribed upon the items as different owners have transformed their material characteristics. Other examples might be repaired items – the patches added to favourite jeans and jackets, the woollen jumper which has been repeatedly darned, or the old teddy bear which has been repeatedly repaired. Such acts do not just physically layer these items but also potentially add imaginative layers of times gone by, experiences or reminders of the people who have changed them. I am reminded of the Japanese practice of Kintsugi, whereby broken ceramics are repaired with lacquer mixed with gold, silver or platinum. Rather than hide the broken aspects, Kintsugi is a transformative practice which aims to display and celebrate the repairs which have been undertaken by highlighting them (DeSilvey and Ryan, 2018; Keulemans, 2016). The repairs form a material record of the object: a ceramic and visible palimpsest of the object's history.

From layers to leaking

The concept of Kintsugi leads me to think about when objects 'leak'. I use this term broadly to explore how parts of objects and materials travel. In some instances, parts of objects may break off, detach from the whole and end up in incongruous places; in others, the transference might be less obvious, perhaps even invisible – hence the term leaking. Conjuring images of either liquids or gases escaping a container, leaking usefully captures the pervasiveness of some materials and their abilities to detach and escape from the whole. This idea of objects essentially shedding parts of themselves connects with Grosz's (1995) notion of the leaky body, and in keeping with this, some of the examples I discuss are bodily. Whilst Grosz uses the notion to illuminate the lived, fleshy experiences of the body (particularly the female body), this idea of something which is supposed to be coherent and bounded is useful for thinking about how we perceive everyday objects. As noted, all of the chapters prior to this one, even those where objects which are no longer present are discussed, have approached objects as bounded. The first half of this chapter peels back the material layers of affinities both physically and imaginatively, whilst what follows in the second half draws on the previous chapter on circulations to explore how parts of objects and their material affinities travel and 'shed' into other spaces and settings. Often such settings and spaces are 'out of place' to where you would normally expect to find that object and its associated materials. In some instances, they may not even be visible, and, as I discuss, their finding or knowledge of their existence can be surprising and unsettling.

Broken bits, broken affinities?

The first example I draw on is when parts of objects break off, revealing their material layers within. I explore not only how this can unsettle our perception of the object as a coherent (and often usable) whole but also how it can impact upon the material affinities and connections that object is inscribed and imbued with. I have drawn on several examples in previous chapters of when objects break or fail to operate in their desired way and how this reveals their material qualities. As Graham and Thrift (2007: 2) note, 'things only come into visible focus as things when they become inoperable'. Examples are the hole in our shoe and the stain on our top (in Chapter 3), which force us to make a decision about what to do next with them. Often, broken items do just this – they force us to consider 'what next?' with an item. Is it still usable? Can it be repaired? How does it alter how we feel about it? Does it need to move into a transitional zone within the home whilst we decide what to do with it?

Take, for example, a mug I recently broke at home. This mug had been purchased three years earlier on a very memorable family holiday to Disney World, Florida. It was grey, made of ceramic materials and had a Mickey Mouse design. It certainly was not something I would consider a treasured or 'sacred' possession, being used every day for hot drinks. Nonetheless, its existence reminded me of that holiday. The mug had survived a house move and probably hundreds of washes in the dishwasher. However, one morning I took it out of the dishwasher and the handle had snapped off. It was a clean break – the handle was located at the bottom of the dishwasher, and the body of the mug remained in the top drawer – but it was no longer usable. Both myself and my partner were quite (surprisingly) perturbed by this, and the decision was made to put the mug in the garage and decide – when we had time – if it could be glued back together. Four months on and the mug and the broken handle are still there. Whenever I go in the garage and see the mug, I find myself questioning why I cannot simply throw away this broken mug or its handle and why the sight of the severed handle and the chalky white ceramic now visible on the body of the mug concerns me. Perhaps if the body of the mug had cracked, I would simply have thrown it away and rationalised this loss, but something lingers – regarding not just the potential repairability, and therefore future usability of the mug, but also the connections and memories the mug conjures. In other words, the material affinities it enables are bound up with its future.

For now, the mug is relegated to the transitional zone in the garage, its presence taunting me to decide its fate. The broken handle revealing its bared materiality is both jarring and unsettling, illuminating the layers of mug, its abilities to 'leak' in the broadest of senses and, importantly, the fact that the mug and perhaps my memories are no longer whole. I do not wish to sound dramatic, but in some respects the broken mug feels something of a threat. Its broken status and the fact that I may need to throw it out threaten the treasured memories I have of that holiday. Returning to discussions of memorabilia in Chapter 2, I argue that the mug is a symbolic reminder of that memorable time. Yet I would argue that with its usability potentially destroyed, the memories are threatened. Of course, as Smart (2007: 40) notes, memories are not static and can be reconstructed and embellished over time. I am aware that the breaking of the mug adds a layer to these memories. Not unlike the loss of Joanie's pottery cat (in Chapter 2), which held great sentimental value and reminded Joanie of her nana, the breaking of the mug amplifies its importance as a vestibule of memories. Wrapped up in this are normative judgements around disposal (see Chapter 3) – why would I keep a broken, unusable everyday mug? It is not something I can now use, nor is it something I would choose to display. It is broken, fractured and no longer whole. Thus, the memories of that holiday were sustained and reproduced not just by the mug's existence but also by its continued, everyday use. No longer whole, the mug ceases to function in the same physical or symbolic way.

Fibres that travel: the power of detritus

Whilst the previous section explored when objects break and reveal their material layers, this second example is concerned more with how objects shed materials and how these materials and their affinities travel. Fluff and fibres from textiles; feathers from birds, pillowcases or duvets; hair from people or fur from animals; crumbs from food; and just general dust are a few examples of objects 'leaking' and shedding. These materials become detached from the object as a whole, a marker of its degeneration or, in the case of living beings shedding materials such as hair or fur, its regeneration. As I explore, we are often alerted to such materials only because they turn up in incongruous places, far removed from the object or body they originated from.

Hair offers an ideal example of a bodily material that travels, often turning up in random places. As discussed, hair is biologically inert bodily matter. Once past the point of the hair follicle, hair is dead. Through movement, brushing or catching in clothes or other items, strands of hair can become detached from the head (or anywhere else on the body) and are essentially set loose. Often this might land in the immediate vicinity – on our clothes or furnishings – but hair also has this uncanny ability to travel. Moved by the breeze or transferring from one object to another through its capacity to cling to things (particularly textiles), strands of hair have the potential to travel long distances from their source. I regularly find strands of my own long hair in the gym I frequent, in my car or office, and wrapped around the bottom of my vacuum! The same can be said of my cat's fur, which whilst it seems to cling to my clothes and sometimes feels impossible to remove, also turns up in the strangest of places.

Whilst finding our own hair in random places can be a little disconcerting and may lead us to question just how it ended up there, finding the hair of others can be unsettling and unnerving in other ways. In Douglas's words, hair is 'matter out of place', but strangely whereas we may be okay with the presentation of our own hair detached from our bodies, many people are not okay when presented with the hair of others. Though not a focus of my research on hair, this became apparent when asking participants about how they felt about the large piles of cut hair which often reside on hair salon floors:

> I wouldn't want to pick up someone else's hair because you don't know whose it is. It could be someone with nits or dirty hair....
>
> (Jennifer, Focus Group 2)

> It's like when they sweep up at the hairdressers and there's all that hair, it's just **so** unattractive.
>
> (Lena, Focus Group 1, Hair Project)

Jennifer and Lena's responses to the cut hair, piled on the floor of the hair salon, represent what many people feel at the sight of someone else's hair.

You, the reader, may have found the hair of someone else in a restaurant meal or on a furnishing in a hotel room you are staying in. Such incidences, as in Jennifer and Lena's quotes, generally evoke expressions of revulsion and disgust. The 'half identity' (Douglas, [1966] 2000: 161) of the cut hair, no longer attached to its owner's body but retaining some essence of their being, seemingly makes severed hair 'dirty' and a potential contaminant or pollutant. Jennifer's quote is particularly poignant, once again conjuring notions of the 'imagined other' (see Chapter 4) – an 'unknown other' who may have nits or dirty hair. Thus, the stray hair, disembodied from its owner, is seen as a threat to the social order, potentially carrying with it the power to pollute. The hair is 'othered', and its connections to an imagined other are seen as potentially dangerous.

Interestingly, strands of hair do have the power to pollute whilst on their travels but not in the immediate contaminatory way we may imagine when we see a stray hair somewhere. Many of us will have had to go through the grim task of having to clean out the plughole of the shower, faced with the hairy, soapy gunk that does not wash away or disintegrate. Owing to its molecular structure, hair does not easily break down or degrade. It is this strength that fostered the Victorian practice of hair jewellery as a way of mourning and memorialising the dead. As Pointon (1999: 40) notes, sealing a loved one's hair in a piece of jewellery signifies attempts to keep dead souls alive, 'bodily trace metamorphosed into document', and many items remain intact today. Seventeenth-century writer Thomas Browne (1958), in his book *Urne Burial*, concludes, 'teeth, bones and hair give the most lasting defiance to corruption', remaining long after death and burial. Just as plugholes are difficult to unblock, hair also does not easily degrade in sewers. Whilst the powerful chemicals used by sewerage companies have the ability to break down hair during water treatment, hair can become lodged and entwined in fatbergs before it reaches such sites (Monacella and Keane, 2021). Fatbergs are caused primarily by the combination of non-biodegradable items entering water systems, such as wipes and sanitary items flushed down the toilet, along with fat, oil and grease (FOG) deposits which bind these materials together, causing a mass or 'berg' which blocks the sewer (Foden et al., 2018). Fatbergs are 'the excess of our everyday lives' (Monacella and Keane, 2021: 201), made up of the 'disgusting amalgam of "natural" and "unnatural" bodily excreta' (Michael, 2020: 380).

Whilst many of us will never encounter a fatberg, this example illustrates the power of bodily materials to travel and have affects far away from their original source – the body. Hair, skin, nails and dandruff are all materials and fibres that the body sheds. These have the capacity to circulate and have agency away from the body – conjuring images of imagined 'unclean' others when encountered in unexpected places or having the ability to attach and bind with other materials to produce problematic effects. Incidentally, studies are being conducted to explore whether human hair can be used to clean up oil spills – confirming the persistency and potency of hair as a material.

Returning to the notion of material affinities and how affinities circulate (see Chapter 4), this once again illuminates not just how objects and their respective materials travel but also the imaginative and physical power of them as they move through different spaces. This emphasizes the circulatory nature of objects and materials.

Of course, it is not just bodily detritus that has the capacity to travel. As discussed, there are numerous other examples of objects which shed matter as they degenerate – food, textiles and even furniture. Dust, for example, is a form of detritus produced by movement, corrosion or combustion of objects and materials (Girts, 2012). There are different types of dust often assigned to the type of material the dust has originated from, such as mineral dusts, metallic dusts, or organic dusts such as pollens or flour (Girts, 2012). Some dusts are visible; others, such as tyre dust, fall into the microparticulate category and are invisible (see next section). Rust, for example, is a form of dust formed by the corrosion of metals. Some dusts, like house dust, are composed of multiple materials, including human skin, fibres from furniture, clothing floor and ceiling coverings, pollen, soil particles and dead insects. Whilst we may expect to see house dust accumulating on furniture, as Fine and Hallett (2003: 2) discuss, 'dust reminds us of the limits of our control over our environment'. As expected, dust too is thought of as 'dirt' and something to be removed. Not unlike hair, the dust of unknown others found in unfamiliar spaces may evoke reactions of disgust and revulsion; dust becomes an affinity or connection to imagined others. Dust is a popular marker of uncleanliness, often depicted in films and television shows by a character entering a space, generally another character's home, and running their finger along a surface to inspect it for dust. Social and gendered norms dictate that we should remove dust by polishing, hoovering and using other technologies of dust management (Fine and Hallett, 2003). Dust not only reminds us of the shedding and 'leaky' capacities of objects and their materials but also, not unlike the body, prompts our repeated action and maintenance. Finally, it is worth noting that whilst the normative reaction to matter out of place, such as dust or stray hair, is to remove it, or remove ourselves from it, in some instances visible detritus is made welcome. In the following chapter, I discuss the management of decay and how often in institutional settings objects are left to degenerate or, in some instances, their decay becomes a feature of their importance. For example, dirt on social movement banners of historical significance becomes part of their importance. Likewise, decisions are made as to whether 'historic mould' on objects should be removed. In these examples, material affinities to times gone by or historic processes of decay are sometimes celebrated and cherished.

Invisible leaking

The final example of layers and leaking I draw on considers invisible materials. Whereas the previous two examples of when objects shed and leak focus on the visibly obvious – broken bits of objects or objects which shed materials or fibres – this example is much harder to determine because it is not apparent to the human eye. Such materials are unseen and thus their material qualities and effects are difficult to determine. This element of the invisible – and therefore, for many, 'the unknown' – is a source of much anxiety, as I shall explore. In many instances, these materials are invisible because of their size; in others, it is because people are unaware of their existence within or as a material component of objects.

I began with the latter, building on the discussion in Chapter 3 regarding the difficulties in determining what an object is made of. A good example to start with here, and one that strikes fear in many people, is the material asbestos. Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral renowned for its insulating properties. Once a construction staple, asbestos was used abundantly during the 19th and 20th centuries (although its origins are much earlier) in all manner of building components from flooring, roofing, electrical work and even paints and decorative plaster, such as Artex – a common feature in many UK homes during the 1980s and '90s. It was also used extensively in the auto industry (Gregson et al., 2010) and in household products such as oven gloves and ironing boards. In many respects, asbestos was a 'dream' material: flexible, reliable and ideal for a variety of applications across a range of industries and sectors. However, as is now well known, asbestos is extremely hazardous to human health. When exposed or disturbed, asbestos fibres are released into the atmosphere and, if inhaled, can result in a range of diseases, including lung conditions and cancer. It was the deadly potency of such fibres and asbestos' ubiquity as a construction material which led to it being banned in the UK and the European Union in 1999. However, it is this ubiquity which continues to cause issues, as asbestos remains in many buildings built before this time. Furthermore, despite the risks, asbestos is still the material of choice in many parts of the world (Lin et al., 2019).

One of the core issues with removing asbestos is that it is difficult to determine and identify. Owing to its flexible, adaptable and unrivalled material properties, it remains embedded within a multiplicity of different objects, sites and spaces. It is visible in terms of its material being seen by the human eye but invisible in that it is often 'unseen' and hidden away and requires a trained eye to identify. As Gregson et al. (2010) discuss in their study, asbestos, in the main, remains inert, and its performative and transformative qualities come into being only when it is disturbed and fibres are released. Even then, to the untrained eye, the disturbance and potential exposure to asbestos fibres and dust may not be realised. So, whilst asbestos in a formed state may be identifiable to specialists, the fibres released when it is disturbed are invisible. As Gregson et al. (2010: 1070) note, asbestos, like many other materials, has the 'capacity to surprise'. When disturbed, it is transformed, it performs and has performative effects – be that making people ill or urging them to do something to contain and supress its agency.

The performative and transformative abilities of invisible materials can also be seen in other examples. Returning to my research on plastic, we may be able to identify a plastic bottle or a plastic yoghurt pot as plastic, but, in some instances, the plastic element is hidden and invisible:

> I think because there are so many types of variety of plastic, and what I would consider plastic wouldn't necessarily be what you'd consider in some items. Like, looking at the lids of the plastic things that you peel off, it is plastic, but I wouldn't recycle it, the film that goes on it. I assume that that is plastic. There are so many types of plastic, or what people would consider plastic, that sometimes I am like, should I or shouldn't I?
>
> (Participant Wendy, Plastic Project)

As Wendy discusses, it is difficult to determine which packaging is plastic, and as she states, what she determines as plastic someone else may not. Items which tended to cause the most issues included fruit netting, crisp packets, Tetrapaks, films and lids, absorbent layers in packaging such as meat, toothpaste tubes and butter packets, amongst many more. An item mentioned by many participants was tubes of crisps:

> Because some of these have got covers that you could consider could be plasticky. The problem is when you've got something that's a mixed material.
>
> Pringles tubes are also a – they have plastic lids but you can't throw them in the plastic recycling. They have metal base, cardboard tube. But the cardboard cylinder has got foil on the inside. So, it's like, where does that go? It's everything.
>
> (Participant Emma, Plastic Project)

As Emma confirms, this combination of materials within the tube of crisps with seemingly metal, cardboard and plastic components caused issues for many participants and how it should be recycled. This quote illustrates how people use touch and sound, alongside sight, to try to determine what something is made of (Holmes and Holmes, under review). Some items were described as mimicking other materials – crisp packets, for example, were determined to be metal because of their foil-like texture and feel, whilst wipes, such as cleaning and baby wipes (which are polymer-based), were determined as textiles because of their fabric feel. These tactile approaches to try to determine what something is made of illuminate the complexities of defining different materials. In this instance, materials are not transformed in terms of their material composition like asbestos, but their materiality has performative effects. Confusion around such objects and the materials they are made of provokes a range of different practices, as households use different tactics to try to determine whether something can be recycled and, if so, which bin it should go in. Some try to separate out what they perceive to be the different material components; others designate the item as mainly one material type and put it in the corresponding bin; others put it straight into general waste. Nonetheless, as discussed in Chapter 3, these decisions are anxiety-inducing. They require thought and (in instances such as dismantling) skill, and they are far from uniform across households.

To add complexity, it difficult not only to determine whether an item contains plastic, but also to define what sort of plastic it incorporates. There are thousands of polymer types, and many more are in development. Some are easily determined by a trained eye or by recycling markers which are found on many items, but you need to know what you are looking for. In the UK, recycling markers are found on packaging labels and consist of a triangle with a number inside. The number corresponds to the type of plastic the material is made of. For example, most plastic drinking bottles have a marker of 1, which corresponds to PET (polyethylene terephthalate); laundry detergent or milk bottles have a marker of 2, which is HDPE (high-density polyethylene). There are seven such markers in total. Although these are a helpful addition by packaging manufacturers and for waste handling organisations, they are essentially a redundant feature for households, not least because most households will not know what the markers correspond to and, furthermore, how that effects whether they can be recycled or not. PET, HDPE and LDPE (low-density polyethylene) have no meaning for the typical household. Furthermore, with such differing recycling rules and facilities across the UK, whether they can actually be recycled by the resident local authority only adds to the magical mystery tour of plastic recycling (Burgess et al., 2021). But our research yielded another complexity. Owing to the multi-material nature of so many objects, often the varying materials of items are even unknown to the trained eye. We used a complex piece of kit called an FTIR (Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy) during our research to determine the types of plastic that certain packaging items were made of. This yielded some interesting findings, such as the plastic windows in envelopes being made from a type of polystyrene. Given the previous discussion on how households try to determine items by using tactile measures, the clear plastic windows in envelopes could not be further removed from the white bubble/ball-type look and texture most of us associate with polystyrene. Thus, some items even had the material scientists fooled; hence, not unlike asbestos, there is a 'capacity for surprise' (Gregson et al., 2010: 1070). I do not wish to discuss the complexities of plastic recycling any further, but what this illustrates is the invisible qualities of plastic and, more specifically, different polymer types to 'hide' in items. In turn, this affects how we deal with them and the performativities they enable. This has important consequences for sustainability, as I discuss in the final chapter.

Whilst the previous discussion focuses on objects whereby hidden materials remain intact, plastic is also a good example to explore how, like asbestos, invisible plastic can 'leak' from objects and how, again as in asbestos, its transformation can have performative effects. In the last 5 to 10 years, there has been proliferation in research on micro- and nano-particulates and their potential environmental and health hazards. Microbeads, microplastics and nanomaterials (including nanoplastics) have all hit the headlines for the 'invisible' devastation they can cause – polluting ecosystems from soil to air and water. Microbeads – revealed to be in numerous products from personal care to cleaning products – have been a particular focus. They have been favoured by manufacturers since the 1990s because of their consistency in terms of product performance, functionality as exfoliants, and their aesthetic ability to colour products. Many countries have banned microbeads from particular products. In the UK, microbeads were banned from rinse-off products in 2018, following an investigation by the Environmental Audit Commission (House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, 2016). Similar 'rinse off' bans have been adopted by France, India, New Zealand and other countries, but as Dauvergne (2018: 580), in his discussion on the politics of microbeads, states, bans have not occurred 'evenly across jurisdictions', and 'many developing-country markets have largely ignored the international campaign to ban microbeads'. Yet such bans could be considered a drop in the ocean (excuse the pun) considering the scale of microplastic pollution. Microbeads are merely a subset of microplastics – a term used to cover an amorphous range of micro-particulate plastics pollution from a multiplicity of products and sectors. Studies suggest that trillions of microplastic particles are polluting water ecosystems (Hurley et al., 2018) and that soil ecosystems, particularly agricultural land, are a major sink of microplastic pollution (Boots et al., 2019).

In the household, microplastics are released from a range of products across the home, from caulking around baths and showers, paint, carpets, furnishings (e.g. dust) and even our clothes when they are washed. Thus, on the one hand, we have microplastics which are intentionally added to products to improve their performance; on the other, we have the unintended consequences of what happens to products containing plastic when they undergo some sort of action. Laundry is an ideal example of 'unintended' microplastic release. When washed, synthetic textiles release plastic microfibres into wastewater. Estimates based on domestic washing machines suggest that washing just one synthetic item can release nearly 2000 microfibres (Browne et al., 2011). Global synthetic garment production is increasing rapidly, accounting for approximately 62% of all fibres produced globally in 2020 (Textile Exchange, 2021). Added to this is the recycling of other plastic items into textiles. Sportswear manufacturers have been recycling items such as plastic bottles into clothing for several years. This so called 'greenwear' has been hailed as a solution to the plastic waste crisis whilst making the fashion industry more sustainable (Moorhouse and Moorhouse, 2017). However, although the good intentions of such circular economy strategies are clear to see, there is an irony that the solution to one environmental problem results in another, potentially more catastrophic and widespread problem further down the supply chain. Those polyester fibres recycled from PET bottles and turned into clothing end up in watercourses. And this is where the asbestos example of Gregson et al. (2010) is useful. Not only is it evident from the textile examples that plastics 'leak' materials and that such materials are often invisible, but plastic, like asbestos, has transformative material capacities. When disturbed, it has performative effects – entering water, soil and atmospheric ecosystems, lodging itself in the digestive tracts of sea creatures and, as is becoming more and more apparent, being a major contaminant (Revell et al., 2021). This is occurring through mundane household practices such as washing clothes and decorating our homes; through what is termed secondary microplastics release, whereby larger plastic items, such as plastic bottles, are weathered through exposure to wind, sun or ultraviolet radiation; and through manufacturing and industry processes. Despite being invisible, microplastics is a 'wicked' problem of the Anthropocene (Sardar, 2010); the environmental and health effects are huge and still largely unknown.

As Gregson et al. (2010: 1066) note with reference to asbestos, 'questions of ethics, governance and materials are not confined to new materials'. The same can be said of plastic. Plastic or, more accurately, polymers have the 'capacity to surprise'; they and their transformative capacities do not disappear when recycled into something else. Indeed, the only way to break down a polymer is to reduce it to a monomer. In basic terms, polymers are made up of monomers, smaller molecules, which link together. Ethics and anxieties around plastic are emerging not just because of the growing plastic waste issue but also because of a growing awareness and understanding of plastic's transformative effects, its affinities. Microplastics and nanoplastics are invisible matter out of place. They threaten the social order, causing anxiety because of their invisible power to travel and to contaminate. Not unlike zoonoses (Hinchcliffe et al., 2013) and microbes (Michael, 2020: 388), microplastics are perceived 'as external threats to a healthy society' and are 'othered' because of this, despite their now prevalence in every ecosystem. This is in no way to suggest that society should accept microplastic pollution (although it currently has little choice unless drastic measures are taken) but more to illuminate the potency of such 'invisible' materials. Thus, microplastics and other microparticulates create material affinities. Microparticulates are an invisible other. They have physical, material connections to our household practices and ways of living, resulting from activities we undertake and products we buy, but also as they circulate, potentially impacting our bodies and future lives. Their invisibility and 'nothingness' add to their potency; if we cannot see them, we can only imagine what they are doing.

Finally, I am reminded of the Ancient Greek theory of miasma, the idea that diseases such as cholera could be spread through odour which contained particles from decomposing matter. Whilst the theory was rightly rebuked – not least by the work of slum reformist John Shaw, who discovered that cholera was spread through water – there is something about this theory which resonates with the above. Microparticulates, be they from plastics, asbestos or other forms of 'dust', result from the breakdown and abrasion of matter. Released into the environment, they have the potential to be consumed through the air that we breath, the water we drink and the soil in which our food grows. What is not yet fully known is the impact that some of those particles might have on human health. Whilst miasma theory is redundant, perhaps the idea of invisible travelling particles with the power to have effects should not be dismissed too lightly. Indeed, recent research suggests that we should take such microparticulate matter and its potential effects very seriously (Lim, 2021).

Conclusions

Moving on from exploring the affinities of bounded, discrete objects, this chapter has illuminated the affinities and connections embedded and weaved both physically and sometimes imaginatively within the very material characteristics and 'fabric' of objects. Through a broad focus on 'layers' and 'leaking', it illustrates how objects have the capacity to perform and transform. Such objects and their layers, fibres or particles may not be visible. Indeed, to the everyday person, they may be 'nothing' – ignored, unseen and hidden. But, as I illuminate, they have potency, and their material affinities and connections should not be ignored. Hair is an ideal example for exploring the transient power of objects and materials and the affinities embedded within its layers. Silently narrating hair's history, the layers of the palimpsest reveal both physical and imaginative connections to other people, places and practices. Hair has the capacity to betray us – to reveal when we have done something our hairdresser will not like or when we have gone to another salon. From the physical evidence of previous colours and cuts stored within hair's layers to the imagined hairdresser who is unhappy with our maintenance or upkeep of their labour, our hair connects us to past practices and hairdressers both physically and imaginatively. Whilst hair's bodily status affords it very particular corporeal characteristics, making it more transient, lively and changeable than many other objects and materials, this notion of the material affinities as layered within objects can also be applied to more 'inert' things, such as those that have been repaired or upcycled (see Chapter 4).

From layers follows leaking. The 'leaking' of objects can occur through a variety of means from broken parts of objects to fibres that travel, be these visible or invisible. The Japanese practice of Kintsugi offers a unique take on broken objects, celebrating the transformative power of broken things. And, as in Chapter 3, material affinities are both revealed and threatened by broken objects. In the broadest sense, broken objects 'leak' because they are no longer whole, their materiality laid bare. Often left to reside in transitional zones around the home, such items can be caught between the possibilities of repair versus being thrown in the bin; their presence taunts us to make a decision. Their broken and 'leaky' continued existence threatens the material affinities and connections that they have afforded in the past. Nonetheless, the 'break-down' of objects does not necessarily always mean that things are 'broken'. As I have developed here and also pick up in the next chapter, general decay, wear and tear, or abrasion, of objects can lead to 'leaking'. Hair, dust and fibres have the capacity to leak from the objects and people they originate from and to travel – often to the most incongruous of places. Such everyday (and, in these cases, visible) shedded matter has the ability to both fascinate and repulse us, conjuring imaginaries of unknown others and their habits and practices. Yet not all detritus is visible, nor are all objects what they seem. Some objects leak invisible matter (at least invisible to the naked eye), and some imitate other materials. As illustrated, plastic is one such material. Plastic is a ubiquitous material that now dominates every form of consumption in the Global North, whether we recognise it as such or not. Plastic and polymers are often 'hidden' in objects, imitating the qualities of other materials and confusing us as to what they are and how they should be handled and disposed of. Yet plastic, like many other materials, has the capacity to 'leak', releasing invisible fibres that have transformative effects. These microparticulates pollute ecosystems, building up in soil, air and water the bodies of organisms and potentially us. They are an invisible other connected to our ways of life but also potentially threatening them.

6 Preservation and decay

Exploring alternative accumulation

Introduction

Chapter 5 concluded with the somewhat depressing notion that the leaking and invisibility of some objects and materials pose huge threats to society. In this penultimate chapter, I build on the broader ideas of invisibility and leaking, using them to think about the preservation and heritage opportunities that the non-material offers us in light of the 'crisis of accumulation' society faces (Harrison, 2013a). As with previous chapters, this chapter unites research on cultural institutions with studies on the household, drawing on findings from each to explore our relationships and connections with objects. Picking up where we left off in Chapter 5, I begin by discussing object decay, a topic which has been referred to many times throughout this book but is yet to be fully developed. In Chapter 5, decay was discussed in reference to how objects can break down, shedding often invisible fibres and materials and having transformative effects elsewhere. In this chapter, I draw on my Lost Property Project to explore how decay is managed and, in some instances, enabled by cultural institutions. I liken this to how certain household items are also celebrated for their wear and tear, and indeed their decay becomes a core feature of that object. I illuminate how value is central to these decisions and often things are preserved and treated for decay if they are to perform. Replicas form part of this discussion, operating as stand-ins for the original and a means of preventing further decay.

This preservation and even celebration of decay pave the way for a discussion of how objects are preserved for future generations. This entails the decisions made by cultural institutions about what should and should not be kept (see Chapters 3 and 4), and also what is morally right to keep, or the decisions we as individuals make about what is worthy of keeping and passing on/down to others (see Chapter 4). As I illuminate, preservation in some instances is impossible, not just because items are so decayed and beyond salvaging but also because of what I term 'material disconnect'. This is when there is no longer any way to use particular objects because the technology or other objects they are dependent on to be put to use cease to exist. We could operate

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the object (such as a cassette) if only we had the other technology that went with it (the now-obsolete cassette player). In this instance, material affinities are broken. The latter part of the chapter moves on to explore alternatives to material accumulation and a growing shift towards experiencing things rather than owning or possessing them. I discuss the possibilities the digital economy affords with developments such as digital curation, three-dimensional (3D) applications and augmented reality software. Likewise, I draw on slower forms of consumption, which advocate more collective and collaborative forms of consuming focused on an ethics of care. Yet, as I illustrate, the human desire for possession is great, and the need for tangible, material goods which can be touched, felt and owned ensures the continuation of accumulation.

Dealing with decay

As DeSilvey (2017: 11) notes, 'matter continually degrades'. As discussed in the previous chapter, whilst objects may seem stable and obdurate, their boundaries complete, objects can break down and evolve over time. Colours fade when exposed to sunlight; fibres become loose and shed when objects are handled or come into contact with other things; and temperature changes may cause materials to expand or contract. Decay, like detritus, is an inherent feature of materiality. In some instances, such as with perishable items like food, decay occurs quickly; in others, it takes much longer. Just as we try to deal with the detritus from objects and things, so we try to manage and prevent their decay. We stitch fraying materials, we apply polish to protect leather, we use fridges and freezers to preserve food, and we coat metals in paint to prevent rust. Our efforts to stop material decay, to try to limit and slow down its effects, are everywhere. Not unlike the palimpsest of hair, objects demand our continual attention to deal with their transient qualities and slow down their demise. Such transient qualities are often disguised by the slowness of their transformational abilities, perhaps occurring over months or years; nonetheless, no matter how subtle or small the change may be, objects do change.

Managing and dealing with decay are core features of cultural institutions. My interviews with curators, librarians and archivists, as part of the Lost Property Project, illuminated the complexities that object decay poses for institutions. As I go on to discuss, this often involves difficult decisions concerning whether items are 'fit' to be put out on display, the conditions in which they should be displayed and stored, and the level of intervention – restoration or conservation – that objects should have to ensure their continued 'performance'. This relates to Chapter 4's discussion regarding the decisions and value judgments made about the fate of objects in institutional collections and whether items should be kept or moved along in some capacity. One common concern is the different conditions that different types of objects and collections require, as the following museum curator participant discusses:

> The natural history stuff tends to be kept amidst humidity so it's not too dry whereas metals you keep in a very low humidity to stop them rusting, that kind of thing.... so say like taxidermy like standard thing is that conservators will say in the light levels, fifty lux because beyond that it'll fade.
>
> (Museum Curator, Lost Property Project)

As this quote illustrates, different objects require different conditions to prevent decay. Practically, this involves different spaces, storage facilities, and technologies to ensure that objects and their materials are stored and, importantly, displayed in their optimum conditions. Likewise, when objects are circulated to other institutions through institutional loans, they are accompanied with certain rules about how the item should be handled, moved, stored and displayed:

> So it's that idea of unbroken custody, that an object's in our care, and we hand over care to another organisation that will behave in the same way that we do. So we have very stringent systems in place. We want to know exactly how they're going to treat that object in terms of, you know, what's the temperature of the room it's going to be in? The light, the relative humidity, all of that. How secure is it going to be?
>
> (Librarian Lost Property Project)

This quote from a librarian participant illuminates how objects on loan are subject to stringent rules and conditions to ensure that they are handled and cared for in the same way at the recipient institution as they are at the donor institution. As discussed in Chapter 4, this notion of 'unbroken custody' is as much about ensuring the provenance of the object as it is about maintaining and preserving its material qualities. The optimal temperature, light and humidity are all vital to preserving the object and its materiality; get these conditions wrong and decay could be accelerated. Yet what we see here is that decay becomes a more prominent material concern that must be dealt with when things are being made to perform. Several of the institutional participants mentioned how object management was brought to the fore when items were set to be put out on display or being loaned to another institution to go on display. Ensuring that items 'looked their best' (librarian participant) would often involve objects undergoing processes to restore them and lengthen their lives. Such actions might not occur if the objects are resigned to a drawer or cupboard. This raises debate about the differences between object conservation and restoration and the different treatment of objects, which I will move on to next. Of course, part of this is because of the threat of accelerated decay that having something out on display potentially poses because of increased light, temperature, humidity exposure and so forth.

Conservation or restoration?

For many institutions, the management and prevention of decay pose complex challenges and navigating between conservation versus restoration practices. The former is focused on maintaining the object in its current state, whilst the latter seeks to restore an object to its original condition. All of the institutions I spoke with were keen to point out that their curatorial practices are focused on conservation rather than restoration and, as one noted, that nothing should be done to an object that is not 'reversible'. As Garry Thomson (1986: 2) explains in his work on the museum environment, conservation in such an institutional setting has two elements:

> 'Firstly, the control of the environment to minimize the decay of artefacts and materials; and, secondly, their treatment to arrest decay and to stabilize them where possible against further deterioration. Restoration is the continuation of the latter process, when conservation treatment is thought to be insufficient, to the extent of reinstating an object, without falsification, to a condition in which it can be exhibited.'

Thus, conservation and restoration are essentially markers on a spectrum, and the latter follows the former in terms of object intervention. Whilst taking us off at something of a tangent, this distinction is interesting because it brings into question the idea of whether decay is stalled or whether it is rolled back and removed. To return to the thread that binds this book together, this has implications for the material affinities of the object.

'Blooming' or 'blushing', for example, is a form of decay that occurs to paint. It is caused by condensation, producing a milky white haze, which is essentially a form of mould. Techniques to remove bloom include (at the less invasive end) polishing and (at the more extreme) removing the bloom and repainting. Both require chemical applications. At one institution I spoke with, removing bloom was part of their practice with objects (particularly banners and posters) they acquired. The lengths they would go to do this were not discussed, but this raises interesting questions regarding the material significance of decay. On the one hand, removing the bloom is about stabilising the object; on the other hand, does removing it remove part of the historical significance of the object, and is it not an act of restoration? Another example refers to what one institutional participant described as 'historic mould', which was found to be present on some medical art. This came to light only because the collection was to be used by a scholar. The decision was taken to 'clean up' the art so the scholar could use it.

However, in other instances, decay appears to be valued and even celebrated. One museum curator described how many of the objects they have are particularly fragile and how items such as banners and newspapers were not made to last. Yet they would try to keep them exactly as they received them. In the case of the banners, he described how sticky tape used to create the banners would be left on even it was no longer holding the banner together. In that instance, glue would be used to bind the banner together so it could still be displayed, but the sticky tape would remain because it was part of the original banner. Likewise, if the banners had dirt on them from their original march and use or had stickers stuck on them, these too would be left because of their historical significance.

Hence, some forms of decay appear to be privileged over others and, rather than being a hindrance, become a feature of the object and its significance. In part, this can be explained by the material affinities the decay has – the dirt on the banners being relevant to the conditions of the march on the day, perhaps a highly significant day for that movement and for social and cultural history more broadly. The stickers further connect the banner to the movement and the people of interest attending the march. But does the bloom on the paint of the poster or the historic mould on the medical art not add to the material affinities of these objects? Is it not part of their history or provenance? It may not connect the objects to significant people or places, but it is a feature of its biography, its treatment and its history. As the librarian participant noted, ‘it is very difficult making these decisions about what gets conservation and what doesn’t’. Once again, this comes down to value (see Chapter 3). Some forms of decay are privileged over others because of their material affinities. Other forms of decay are seen as a threat to the stability of the objects. Yet they may receive treatment for that threat only if they are valued – be that because they are going out on display and need to look their best or, as in the case of the medical art, they are to be used. Thus, whilst the notion of the ‘equality of objects’ is increasingly being used within cultural institutional settings, this is fraught with complex decisions around the material affinities that each object is deemed to already have (who/what/where it connects to) and those that it may have in the future (who is going to use it/value it), as I shall discuss shortly. This is not to criticise cultural institutions that, with limited time and resources, must make such difficult decisions. It is more to illuminate the complexities of decay and how material affinities are inherent in decisions about how it should be dealt with. DeSilvey’s (2017) work on decay discusses this bind between restoration and conservation in much more depth than I have scope to do here.

Replicas

Before we apply some of the above discussions on decay to how we value and view our own decaying personal possessions, one final aspect of institutional decay is worthy of consideration. That is the use of replicas. This practice was totally unbeknownst to me as an ‘outsider’ before this research, but it is not that uncommon. Replicas can be used by institutions when an item is considered to be of enough significance and merit to be out on display but physically is too fragile and decayed to be moved or to survive such conditions. Other instances where replicas may be used concern items which are highly valuable. For example, there is an ongoing 'urban myth' that the Crown Jewels on display in the Tower of London are indeed a replica and the real jewels are stored safely away elsewhere. According to Annelies Van de Ven (2016), replicas and casts of items of social and academic significance were produced as early as Roman times and were used predominantly as educational tools. However, museological development of the 19th and 20th centuries – what McDonald (2002) refers to as the collecting projects of encyclopaedic museums – saw a drive towards authenticity and the need for original objects. Thus, replicas were shunned because of their deemed 'inauthenticity' and originals were acquired – often through highly contentious means. Yet contemporary curatorial practice is changing, and although 'there is still debate on the level of authenticity' that replicas offer, 'museums now not only display replicative materials, but also use replicative technologies to facilitate visitor participation' (Van de Ven, 2016: 93).

One of the institutions I interviewed is well known for having as part of its collection a food item which is over 150 years old. This item is prominent because of the geopolitical event it symbolises. It cannot be put out on display: it is perishable and would attract pests, and exposing it to display would speed up decay. Therefore, the institution uses a 3D printed replica in its place. This ensures that the significance of the object, and its symbolism as part of the museum's collection about this political event, is celebrated and recognised without causing detriment to the original. Likewise, the library institution I interviewed used replicas to prevent the decay of significant books:

> 'So yes, we do use surrogates sometimes.... So having the surrogate outside of a case gives people a proper feel, you know, they can engage with that in a somatic way....'
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

In this example, surrogates, or replicas, are used because books in the library are to be handled and used by readers, and despite rules such as wearing gloves or banning food and drink, this use accelerates decay. Unlike museum exhibits, they are not stored in cabinets protected from the wear and tear that handling can cause. Such books may be first editions, one of a kind. The use of replicas is designed to ensure that the original can remain intact and is protected from decay and potentially destruction.

This use of replicas provokes two core points. First, technology can provide alternatives and this provides us – society as a whole, alongside institutions more specifically – with possibilities which may enable us to avoid the crisis of accumulation we are facing. I develop this idea of alternatives later in this chapter, but for issues such as the need for repatriation of particular objects held essentially hostage in museums and institutions, replicas are a potential option to ensure continuity of collections whilst original items are returned to their homelands. This is not to suggest that one should simply replace the other with no explanation of the original object's heritage and history, but it does offer an alternative, particularly if most of a collection is made up of objects which were looted from their original homeland. Nonetheless, replicas essentially mean more accumulation, as I shall go on to address.

Second, replicas challenge material affinities. In one sense, they are not the real thing; therefore, they cannot hold the same traces as the original. They may not bear the same wear and tear or the traces of those who have handled them before. However, that does not prevent them from having the same imaginative potential. As the librarian participant notes, having a physical copy of a book, albeit a replica, enables somatic engagement. Readers are able to hold the book, appreciate its material qualities and respond tactilely towards it. If the replica is so good and so like the original, perhaps the material affinities can be the same towards both original and copy.

Household decay

This seems a relevant point in this chapter to segue back to the household and apply some of the above aspects of decay to our own personal items. Perhaps the most striking for me is the notion of celebrating decay of certain objects. Obvious examples in this category include antiques or, as discussed in Chapter 4, vintage items such as clothing. Such objects, though, are not necessarily celebrated for their decay but because of their age. As we often see on antiques TV programmes, the condition of an old item is equated with its value: the better the condition of the object, the more highly prized it is. Yet there are other examples which are celebrated and revered the more decayed they become. The concept of patina is useful here. In its precise definition, patina is the weathering of a surface, generally a metal which results in a change of colour. Yet the notion of patina has been applied much more broadly to include any changes to an object which happen over time (Clifford, 2009). Such changes are a form of decay, but often this decay and the effects it produces are celebrated. According to historian Grant McCracken (1990), patina was a way of authenticating items in the 18th century, a mark of their quality and use value. This was replaced by fashion and the desire for new, unused goods. As I illustrate shortly, patina can also be used to think about the affinities we have to objects and the embodied relationship we develop with them.

In their work on denim, Danny Miller and Sophie Woodward (2010) discuss the ubiquity of denim jeans and describe how, for many people, old worn jeans represent comfort and trust. We may see the same feelings extended towards other worn items, such as shoes which, through years of wear, we know will not hurt our feet. In these instances, patina is celebrated because of the material qualities the decay has produced. Our affinities with the objects are based on the sensorial and embodied properties the decay has enabled – how something feels and fits better the more it shapes itself to our bodies.

Other examples might be more symbolic – the wearing down of a wedding ring over time represents years of marriage, and well-thumbed books are symbolic of years of reading and enjoyment. These examples link to some degree to the passed-on and upcycled items discussed in Chapter 4. Next I shall discuss keeping things for future generations, but such everyday handed-down items are treasured because of the connections they enable to loved ones passed. Such affinities are woven into the layers of these objects physically through the obvious wear and tear they display and imaginatively through the emotional connections they enable. A further example of celebrated household object decay concerns more transient items – objects which are revered because their age is deemed to improve their material qualities. Certain consumable items such as wine, types of cheese, whiskey, and fermented foods are all deemed better with age, and aged versions of such items have greater financial value.

In the consumer-focused society in which we live, it is easy to assume that 'new is always better', but there are examples where old and, importantly, decaying objects are more highly prized. Returning to McCracken's (1990) patina versus fashion, we see how, like the institutional examples, only certain personal/household items and their decay are privileged. In many other instances, decay of household objects is fought against through practices of restoration and conservation. We wash things, clean them, and maintain and repair them to try to prevent decay. Though ironically, such processes may, in some instances, actually speed up decay (recall the discussion on 'leaky' objects in Chapter 5). Not unlike the institutional examples, in the household, we also see certain items privileged over others in terms of the conservation or restoration they receive. Those more likely to be 'out on display' or assigned for 'special occasions' may be more likely to be conserved and restored than those which are everyday and 'hidden' in terms of their significance.

An example of this emerged from my Thrift Project. Many of the participants I spoke with talked about 'special items' which represented significant occasions. Often these were gifts, particularly wedding gifts, such as sets of crockery. Such sets were stored in particular locations around the home on display for others to see. They were only ever used on important occasions when certain guests were visiting or on prominent family occasions, such as Christmas. When they were brought out for use, great care was taken with them: they were washed by hand rather than in the dishwasher, and only certain adult members of the family were allowed to conduct such maintenance. Children were often warned to be very careful around the 'special plates'. One participant, Edna, who was 95 at the time of the interviews, discussed her china tea set, which was given as a wedding present and which had been her pride and joy as a young married woman in the 1950s

Figure 6.1 Edna's tea set.

(see Figure 6.1). As she noted, 'years back, if you had a china tea set you were everybody… it was only for best … if company came'. This example illustrates how some items are preserved more keenly in the home than others. Such special items are subject to particular practices of care and conservation because of the performative role they fulfil. They represent the household members who live there and the sorts of lives they lead. As I have argued elsewhere (Holmes, 2019a), they are part of the displaying of family and the *families we live by* (Gillis, 1996). Such objects are a marker of status – a material imaginary of the sort of family we wish to display. However, they also mark out *families we live with*, becoming engrained in family traditions, gatherings and practices. Thus, this profane-versus-spectacular distinction, when it comes to the care and preservation of objects, again emerges from active regimes of value wrapped up in social and cultural norms and personal attachments and contexts.

Finally, it is worth making a small note about replicas. As discussed, replicas are a key feature of institutional practice. A means of preventing decay of original and prized objects, replicas feature a little differently in household and personal consumption practices. First, we may see replicas of famous objects or artworks in homes. For example, a print of a famous artist's work may hang on our walls or we may have a replica bust of a Greek god in our garden. Second, replicas feature in another less obvious way through what we might term stand-in or reserve items. We may buy several of the same T-shirts because we really like it. We might be concerned that we might not be able to buy the same item again, so we essentially stock up for future use. Similarly, parents will often buy two of a child's favourite teddy, toy or comforter in case the original is lost. These are not replicas in the same sense as a cultural institution wishing to preserve the original; they are instead stand-ins or reserve items should something happen to the one initially bought. In this case, our affinities to household replicas are based more around the material qualities that such objects offer. We like or value something about the materiality of the original to invest in one or more of the same.

Preserving for future generations

A core part of preventing material decay, particularly in a cultural institutional setting, is concerned with preserving objects for future generations. This was a key theme of my interviews with cultural institutions during my lost property research. It is also a feature of household and personal possessions, albeit often a hidden one. Picking up on some of the themes developed in Chapter 2, I argue that this is about maintaining material affinities to the past – whether these affinities are collective or individual (or institutional). This is also very much about value. What is valued enough to be preserved for the future and for future generations? As many scholars in heritage management and museum studies discuss, such decisions in a cultural institutional or heritage settings are incredibly difficult (see DeSilvey, 2017; Harrison, 2013b). Nobody has a crystal ball and is able to look into the future to see what is worth keeping and what can be discarded. Of course, everything cannot be kept, but the risk is throwing away and destroying something which in the future could be deemed highly valuable. Two institutional curators interviewed during the Lost Property Project discuss this dilemma:

> So we're very much a collecting institution, so again, a lot of my time I'm acquiring material. Sometimes those are things from the past, but also our collecting is important because we've got to collect from the present as well. To hand over to future generations these objects that people will use to kind of better understand what we were about.
>
> (Librarian, Lost Property Project)

> …so what I was referring to was the way in which we treat objects more than their actually financial value. And that's because you're just never sure, the contemporary objects that we're collecting could be that, the kind of valued objects of the future.
>
> (Museum Curator, Lost Property Project)

Both of these quotes illustrate the institutional desires to collect for future generations and to enable future generations to understand how we lived as a society in the 21st century. But, as the museum curator expresses, it is very difficult, particularly with contemporary objects, to determine what will be considered of collective significance to future societies. The librarian participant goes on to add that there is a 'hideous statistic' that 99% of all state papers are destroyed and that 'what's left is just the 1% of material that archivists and records managers think should go in to the historical record.' Thus, the pressure is on institutions to make decisions about the sorts of items deemed valuable and worth keeping for the future. To think of this another way, institutions determine what society gets to keep and hold within its collective memory. They decide the objects which future societies will have material affinities to. However, there are always instances of things being unearthed in various settings – treasure so to speak – which are examples of objects from the past and which museums and cultural institutions do not hold. For instance, during the writing of this book, a haul of Roman items made of gold has been unearthed in a village in Denmark, and a Roman villa containing a rare mosaic depicting Homer's *Iliad* has been found beneath a farmer's field in Rutland, UK. Such 'treasures' will no doubt end up on display in institutional collections and be marvelled at by anyone who can access them, but cultural institutions can only ever provide snippets of what society was like during different eras and the sorts of objects they relied upon. Some objects are bound to be lost and disposed of forever.

In the household, items are also often preserved for future generations, but often this is a much more implicit practice than in cultural institutions. Certain items – those given what Finch and Mason (2000) would term 'heirloom' status – may be determined and recorded in a will to legally document what will happen to them when the owner dies and whom they are being preserved for. Edna's tea set, for example, may be classed as a family heirloom and as something she will determine in her will as an item to pass on to her daughter. Yet, as discussed in Chapter 4, numerous everyday items are also essentially preserved and ear-marked for future generations despite remaining in use and not being documented. An example is Diana's 100-year-old bread knife, which was passed down from her grandmother to her mother and on to her. Such objects may not be itemised in wills, but they are often implicitly identified by their owners and other family members as things which should be kept in the family because of their significance – be it their age, perceived use, sentiment, or financial value. They have too many material affinities to the family to be disposed of.

Material disconnect

Yet not everything can be preserved, and there are instances where, despite the best efforts of institutions or households to hold onto objects, preservation is impossible. The most obvious examples of this are things which decay rapidly, such as food. In a small project on the Marks & Spencer Archive (a large UK-based retailer with its own historical archive; see Holmes and

Hall, 2021), my colleague and I came across instances whereby people had donated decades-old tins of Marks & Spencer food to the archive. Such tins are fascinating from a cultural and social history perspective but, as we were informed by the lead archivist, were essentially hazardous, and the contents had the potential to explode from the tins at any time. Thus, whilst the tin itself could be preserved, to do so involved opening the tin and decanting the contents, therefore losing its original purpose and meaning.

Yet there are other ways in which preservation becomes difficult. Whilst technology offers many alternatives to accumulation (as I discuss next), it also brings with it significant obsolescence:

> So we have some files for another project that are on some floppy disks that nobody can read anymore. So we've managed to find about two people in the country that can possibly get something off of these disks.
> (Archivist, Lost Property Project)

In this example, the archivist is discussing important archival information which is held on floppy discs but which, because most contemporary PCs no longer have floppy disc drives, cannot be easily accessed. This illuminates what I term material disconnect – the object is available but cannot be used, since this requires connections with other technologies which are no longer easily found. Floppy discs, CDs, cassettes, vinyl, MiniDiscs, CD-ROMs and VHS tapes are all examples of obsolete formats, all requiring other obsolete objects to be able to use them. This is to say not that such formats or their associated devices no longer exist at all (as I discuss shortly, many are having a resurgence) but that their obsolescence reveals a particular form of broken material affinities. These are gaps and breaks in what might be termed an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004). One thing depends on another to be able to operate. Without the one, the other ceases to function. This links back to the discussion in Chapters 2 and 4 on collections and how material affinities exist between objects which have some association, as is also evident here. Such objects are physically connected because they depend on each other.

An example I think of here is my sister's wedding video, recorded in 1998. The VHS tape is now redundant as video players are no longer a feature of most households. She has sought to get this transferred to DVD, but with the advent of online streaming, it is likely that they too will be replaced. The recording could be transferred and stored online, but as the above archivist also discussed, transferring from one medium to another not only is difficult but also can result in loss of quality and sometimes content as each transfer potentially results in further loss. Furthermore, there is something jarring about not having the physical videotape of nearly 25 years ago, an original memento of that significant event.

As other academics have discussed, planned obsolescence is a feature of the digital age, as exemplified by high-profile software companies and fought against by "right to repair" movements (see Wieser, 2016; Makov and Fitzpatrick, 2021). Whilst uncovering the huge volumes of e-waste that planned obsolescence produces is undoubtedly necessary, so too is further exploration of the material disconnect this constant churn of technologies creates. What other unusable objects, still in full working order, reside in cupboards and spaces around the home – analogue TVs, fax machines, and pagers? How does this effect the relationships we have with those items? The connections they enabled which we can no longer access? This is perhaps most apparent in items which store data in some way – be that images, videos, text or sound/music – information which may connect us to others, to different times and places, memories and recollections. However, we also see this when something breaks and cannot be repaired since parts for that thing or the technologies to repair it are now also obsolete. This again raises difficult questions about what should be preserved. We cannot preserve everything, but what about generations of the future wishing to learn about the past? I am reminded of the many museums in and around Manchester, the location of my home institution, which depict the advent of the Industrial Revolution. The North West of England was the birthplace of several of the textile machines often renowned as driving the Industrial Revolution: Richard Arkwright's water frame, James Hargreaves's spinning jenny, John Kay's flying shuttle and Samuel Crompton's spinning mule. Examples of these machines remain on show in museums around the region. School visits, as part of history curriculums, promote their prominence in the advent of the industrial age. Yet I wonder if these machines would hold such significance if examples of them had not been preserved. These are not small handheld technologies but large cumbersome machines, particularly in the case of spinning mule, which could be nearly 50 metres long. They take up a lot of space, yet museum curators saw fit to keep them and they are now key attractions. This is not to argue that we should be keeping copies of all technologies but more to emphasize the difficulties in making such decisions based on an unknown future audience.

This leads me to a final point regarding the unusual things which are preserved and the innovative ways in which preservation is occurring. Whilst much of the discussion so far regarding preservation has been about bounded, discrete objects, even those which are designed to contain other forms of material such as videotapes and cassettes, there is also a move within archival and curatorial practice to preserve sound. The preservation of images is expected and accepted, as demonstrated by the numerous hard copy photographic collections stored in cultural institutions and also found in many homes, but the preservation of sound is quite different. Sounds are, of course, preserved through the recording of music (more on that shortly), but other sounds such as regional dialects and accents, oral history testimonies, or speeches and talks are also deemed of significant societal importance. Whilst some of this is because of who was talking and what they were talking about (thinking here also about the huge growth in podcasts), there is something interesting about the preservation of accents and dialects – the way something is said rather than what is said. In this instance, it is the preservation of the sound – a sound that may eventually die out – that is important. Sound has a certain nothingness quality to it. We cannot hold it, touch it, taste it or smell it in the way we can physical objects. It is immaterial/non-material but also material. It is stored in some material capacity, be it on a computer, a disk or some other storage format. We hear it and embody it into the material of our bodies, but we cannot physically hold it. There are physical sound waves but these are not things we can see. The immaterial/material aspect of sound has been discussed by many scholars of sound and music (see McKinnon, 2021), but for me what this indicates is not just how we can preserve unusual and what we may term 'immaterial' things but also the new, innovative and often non-material ways in which things can be preserved – in other words, how digital technologies in particular enable and expand alternative forms of accumulation. I turn to this next.

Alternative accumulation

As in other sections in this book and particularly this chapter, I do not profess to be an expert on curatorial practices, alternative or otherwise. What I aim to do is examine the possibilities of alternative accumulation practices from both an institutional and household perspective and explore what this might mean for connections and affinities to objects. As mentioned above, whilst cultural institutions have taken steps to preserve more unusual things, such as sounds, this has been made possible because of digital innovations. Again, digital preservation is not an area of my expertise, but it warrants brief discussion because of the impact it has on material affinities and the potential it offers for other forms of accumulation. I do not wish to dumb down the field, but for me digitalisation offers two broad possibilities for accumulation practices (both institutionally and more broadly): digital storage and virtual experiences.

First, digital innovation offers huge opportunity for the storage of data and information. This could be the move from paper records, information on floppy discs or microfiche, volumes of photographic collections, books and other physical forms of documentation all to digital storage. Obviously, so much of this is already occurring within institutions, workplaces and the home. For example, when was the last time you had a photograph printed out? Gone are the days of taking rolls of films to the local chemist to be produced into a set of photographs. Yet, up until the early 2000s, this was the norm. This digital move has two practical advantages: it means that less physical space is required for the storage of materials, and, for existing physical items, digital copies (replicas) can be made to ensure that if the original is ever destroyed, the 'thing' still exists in some capacity. Whilst digital storage may seem to be the panacea to many of society's and institutions' accumulation problems, particularly where information and data are concerned, it is not without its issues.

As already discussed, there is always the risk that the churn of digital innovation will render previous storage formats or sites obsolete. This is a particular issue for data or information which was ‘born digital’ – which, in other words, has never been held in any other physical, material form (Karp, 2004). Yet this also raises the issue of the logic of preserving multiple copies of something. Why have a digital replica if we have the physical original? There is an argument that this is a waste of both resources and space. Such an argument is made more pertinent when we consider the environmental impact that digital technology is having. Whilst the internet and all things digital are often perceived as having limited or no carbon footprint, this is far from the case. Recent statistics from the Shift Project (2019), a French think tank focused on the shift to a post-carbon economy, found that digital technologies account for 4% of greenhouse gas emissions and the energy consumption from digital technologies is growing rapidly each year. Thus, whilst digital storage might appear to be a means of saving an example of ‘everything’, this is potentially as problematic as physical storage. Furthermore, there is the under-researched rejection of digital technologies and a resurgence in people wanting to hold and experience tangible things, as I explore in the next section.

The second broad possibility that digital technologies offer as an alternative to physical accumulation consists of virtual reality and virtual experiences. In the curatorial and heritage sphere, this is referred to as ‘virtual heritage’, but such experiential foci extend beyond ‘heritagescapes’ and, as I discuss shortly, also beyond the digital. Again, I confess to not having a vast knowledge of this topic and would refer those seeking more information to others who do (see Cameron and Kenderdine, 2008; Champion, 2021). As Champion (2021: 5) notes, virtual heritage has been described as a fusion of virtual reality with cultural heritage content, enabling users to be transported into heritage sites to ‘experience’ them for themselves. Recent examples include the Virtual Mayflower Project, which transports users into Plymouth’s (UK) Barbican in the 1620s, or the Open Heritage Project, which has posted online 3D models of 26 global heritage projects, including the Roman city of Pompeii and the Native American cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde, Colorado. Some, such as the latter project, can be accessed from the comfort of one’s own home, requiring just the internet; others require travel to particular heritage sites to be able to access the software. The advantages of such technologies are evident – the ability to transport people and embed them into times and spaces gone by offers huge educational opportunities. For people with accessibility issues, being able to experience heritage in a meaningful way via the internet goes some way in overcoming some of the inequalities regarding access and diversity levelled at cultural institutions in the past (Tlili, 2008). During the Covid-19 pandemic, many of these technologies and alternatives were brought to the fore as institutions tried to maintain interest in their collections during periods of lockdown (Burke et al., 2020). Yet, despite these advantages, virtual reality technologies have received mixed receptions (Tan and Rahaman, 2009). This is potentially because people want to experience tangible, material things, as I discuss shortly.

However, this move towards the experiential extends further than cultural institutions and beyond just digital experiences. In consumption practices more broadly, there has been a shift towards replacing ‘things’ with experiences. From a sustainability angle, we can see this through movements such as slow consumption, voluntary simplicity and collaborative forms of consumption. There is a wealth of work on these expansive topics, and although there are differences in terms of practices and aims, these modes of consumption are broadly united by their drive to reduce consumption and live in less resource-intensive ways and also by a focus on consuming in more meaningful and experientially led ways. The slow food movement, for example, is focused on the sensory experiences of growing food and cooking and eating it. As Massimo Montanari (1996: 56) notes, it is about:

> Caring for the selection of ingredients and the resulting taste, caring for food methods … caring for the sensory messages conveyed by what we eat, for presentation, for the choice of people sharing the food with us, etc.

Parkins and Craig’s (2006) work on slow living advocates being more mindful in our day-to-day lives. Parkins (2004) describes engaging in slow practices which are deliberate, thoughtful and attentive, such as sharing a meal with someone or cycling or walking rather than driving. Likewise, collaborative and collective forms of consumption, such as commoning, focus on the relational aspects of sharing resources (Botsman and Rogers, 2011; Caffentzis and Federici, 2014). I have argued elsewhere (Holmes, 2018a) that shared materials and objects can become the conduits for support, advice, solidarity and friendship (see also Bradley and Perrson, 2022; Morrow, 2019; Valle, 2021). Thus, these more mindful, alternative ways of consuming focus on sharing rather than ownership, and the aim is to reduce consumption and accumulation. In these instances, affinities and connections are created through the sharing of materials and the experiences that this enables.

Finally, it is worth noting how the move towards ‘experiences’ over ‘things’ has also been adopted by more mainstream capitalist culture. Whilst there is little sociological literature on this topic, it is evident from the numerous adverts for spa days, driving experiences or gin tours. Often described as the ideal ‘gift’ for those who have everything, this form of consumption is not about seeking alternatives to accumulation for sustainable or equitable reasons. Rather, it builds on neoliberal rhetoric regarding improving the self and looking after one’s wellbeing (Lavrence and Lozanski, 2014) or, as McDonald et al. (2013: 489) put it, where ‘anxiety, emptiness and isolation are converted into pleasure and healing through leisure consumerism’.

Rejecting the alternatives: desiring the tangible

From digital forms of accumulation to sharing and experiencing material things rather than owning them, the above presents several alternatives which may help society, and institutions more specifically, deal with the crisis of accumulation. Yet, as I have hinted, just because such alternatives are on offer does not mean they are always appealing and will be adopted. As I go onto explore, this is because people desire tangible, material things. Recorded music is a useful example here. As discussed previously, music or sound has immaterial qualities to it – we cannot physically see the sound waves or hold the actual music in our hands. In the last two decades, the move to digital forms of music has been huge. According to the World Economic Forum (2022), music streaming in 2021 accounted for 65% of global music sales. This shift has seen the likes of the iPod, mp3, cassette player and so forth become redundant. Yet, whilst the move to digital music has been a phenomenal change to the way we consume music, some older music formats are having a resurgence. As the World Economic Forum (2022) concludes, sales of CDs and vinyl have grown for the first time in 20 years, and vinyl sales increased by over 50% in 2021.

This change has been reflected in my project on rave (see Chapter 1 for project details). Many of the DJs and music professionals I spoke with discussed the renewed interest in purchasing vinyl. It was also a topic of interest to many of the rave fans I interviewed. The 'vinyl versus digital' debate is not a new topic in the rave/dance music scene (see Montano, 2010; Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018). Whilst it was not a focus of my research on rave, it came up a lot. From the music professional point of view, the shift to digital forms of music has been beneficial. Not only is digital music highly manipulatable, enabling DJs to change formats, tempos and baselines, it is also much easier to transport a USB stick from gig to gig than heavy cases of vinyl. However, for some rave fans, this shift was seen as the demise of authentic forms of rave. As Montano (2010: 409) concurs, the 'use of vinyl by some is seen as authenticating the practice'. As one professional DJ, Steve, noted, vinyl is often perceived as 'better' with 'a heavier, richer sound'. Participants discussed 'the magic of the crackle' when vinyl is played or the excitement at flicking through a vinyl collection. Interestingly, whilst most of the DJs I spoke with would always use digital over vinyl at gigs, all of them still had extensive vinyl collections stored away in attics, garages and lock-ups. Other than the obvious financial value of decades-old vinyl, why have DJs painstakingly kept such collections, particularly when they take up so much space? Likewise, why is vinyl making a comeback?

When the 'vinyl revival' is coupled with recent reports that there has been a resurgence in analogue photography (Kars, 2022), or the 'Polaroid revival', this suggests that something else is at work. Bartmanski and Woodward's (2015) work on vinyl is useful here and can be applied to other analogue formats seeing a resurgence. As Bartmanski and Woodward (2015) discuss, vinyl is becoming popular again because of the sensory and material properties it offers. This includes the physicality of vinyl – its weight, giving it a physical presence. They also discuss the aesthetics of vinyl, which is now available in coloured options. Part of the aesthetic appeal is the artwork of the cover, making it easily distinguishable from other tracks. This was also mentioned by some of the DJs I spoke with during the rave project, particularly those who had made the switch from vinyl to digital. Vinyl covers are easily recognisable and therefore easy to find. Whilst digital is easy in the sense that it can be ordered in any number of ways in digital files, it is not much use when a DJ cannot actually remember the name of the track they are searching for or the artist, but they can remember what the cover looked like or what colour it was. I would imagine we can all think of iconic album or single covers which are synonymous with the songs and artists associated with them – Nirvana's *Nevermind*, the Beatles' *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, or Oasis's *What's the story morning glory?*. Such images become visual proxies of the music they are associated with. Seeing them makes us think of those artists and their famous songs.

For Bartmanski and Woodward (2015: 7), vinyl records are 'aura laden objects' – they hold a particular potency. This in part explains why the DJs I spoke with have held onto their vinyl collections and also why vinyl is a 'collecting object' (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015: 11). Whilst there is an element of nostalgia in this (especially when we consider vinyl collections which span several decades) and the desire to hold onto aspects, memories and objects from the past (see Chapter 2 on memorabilia), there are also aspects of ownership and, importantly, tangibility. Bartmanski and Woodward (2015) come to similar conclusions that, unlike digital, vinyl 'can be possessed, owned, touched and cared for'. As in discussions on possession in Chapter 2, part of the attraction of vinyl is that it can be owned and form part of a wider collection. Whilst, unlike digital music (which is so easily replicated and downloaded), vinyl may be a copyof an original, but it is a materially tangible copy. It can be held, touched and somatically experienced.

I contend that this points to a broader rejection of digitalisation and virtual experiences in favour of the physically and materially tangible. We create affinities to material things. Having those objects, or having had those things, physically in our possession enables us to create connections with other people, times and places. This is not to say that we cannot be transported to a time gone by via listening to a digital track or seeing a digital photograph; it is more to argue that the physical materiality of stuff matters. The immaterial/material nature of music exemplifies this. Music is something which we cannot see or touch, but we desire a means to hold it – to possess, iconize and fetishize a physical material form of it. I argue that this is because it is much easier to create affinities and connections to things we can physically and materially experience. If we think about the practices of 'passing on' objects discussed both earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 4, we cannot easily pass on the digital. Whilst we might hand down our vinyl collection to a relative, we may even stipulate it in our will, we are unlikely to do the same with a digital music collection. I am unaware, given the current licensing restrictions, if such digital 'passing on' is even possible. This is seemingly to do with maximising profits, as the same applies to other digital media, such as video games or online books, which also cannot be shared or handed on to others in the way that physical, hard copies of such things can be. Yet this illuminates not just a possible flaw in the move from material/analogue to digital and its potential to reduce accumulation but also the sensibilities regarding 'stuff'. We want to hand down the things we have owned, used and enjoyed. They might be physically marked with our wear and tear: annotations in books, the scratch at 30 seconds in on the LP, the video game we have loving played for five years. It is these 'marks', the reminders of us, of other places and times, which enable material affinities. So, in a world where overconsumption is a pressing issue – recent estimates suggest that by 2050 3.4 billion tonnes of solid waste will be generated annually around the globe (World Bank, 2018) – how do we 'get over' such sensibilities?

I am reminded of the debates on digital intimacy and the arguments that online relationships are not as intimate as physical, face-to-face ones (Jamieson, 2013). Such arguments discuss the lack of depth of online encounters and the physical lack of touch and connection. Miller et al. (2016) argue that online/digital relationships should not be *instead of* face-to-face interactions but rather *in addition to*, and I see this as a possible way to think about digital versus tangible materials. The digital undoubtedly has huge advantages in the contemporary world. Whilst the environmental impact of online solutions must be considered, when weighed up against the crisis of overconsumption and the huge impact that society's need for 'stuff' is going to have on the world over the next decade, alternatives such as digital solutions and the push towards collaborative forms of consumption offer some solution to these 'real world' problems. Yet how can we overcome this innate desire to own, to possess, to touch? How can we create meaningful connections and affinities to things we do not or cannot possess? And is there a way of finding a balance so that digital or experiential alternatives are 'in addition to' rather than 'instead of' but not in a way that means consuming even more? I pick up these debates in the concluding chapter.

Conclusions

In sum, this chapter has illuminated the paradox of the fragility and persistence of objects and materials. On the one hand, objects leak and decay; on the other hand (as examined in Chapter 5), they persist. I have explored how decay is managed, negotiated and, in some cases, celebrated within both cultural institutions and homes. This has revealed the complexity of decisions about what gets care in institutions, the celebration of patina in households, to the use of replicas to both protect originals and act as reserve items. The decisions made about decay and how, or even if, to deal with decaying objects reveal once again regimes of value at work, wrapped up in norms, attachments and contexts. Such value regimes affect the future of objects and whether such objects are earmarked for preservation. This could be something as influential as a technology which has revolutionised the way we listen to music or something as simple as an ornament passed on through generations of family. However, preservation is not always possible. This may be because objects are beyond conservation or restoration or, in this age of rapid technological development, because they (or other objects and materials they are dependent on to function) are obsolete. In these instances, material affinities are broken, and we are potentially faced with a plethora of objects relegated to transitional zones, unsure of what to do with them next. Alternatives to accumulation offer potential opportunities – digital forms of storage, virtual forms of heritage or a broader focus on consumption experiences over ownership of physical things. Yet these too are not without issue. Whilst the digital may seem like a panacea to the accumulation crisis, it is resource-intensive. But really what holds us back are the affinities we crave with tangible, physical things – to hold, touch and possess material things. Overcome this and society may have a solution to the crisis of accumulation.

7 Rethinking materiality for a more sustainable society

Introduction

The objective of the preceding chapters has been to illustrate the importance of absent, invisible and transient objects in our everyday lives and to illuminate the relevance of their relational capacities. Through the numerous empirical examples which underpin this book, I have revealed some of the objects and materials of 'nothing' whilst unpacking the connections and affinities they enable. From lost flip-flops, to found hats, to lingering broken mugs, to the capacities of dust, I have illustrated the potency of the things we no longer possess, do not 'see' or have no idea of the performative and transformative qualities of until their 'acting back' can no longer be ignored. In sum, stuff connects and it does so in myriad ways. Material affinities to objects and materials can be physically and materially visible, sensory and embodied, imagined and ethereal, documented and recorded. Whilst there is undoubtedly a bias towards centring and identifying the affinities that we as people have with things (despite my attempts to remain object–subject neutral), I have also revealed the connections between objects and how material affinities can be both spatially and temporally located. Thus, such connections are based on not just the 'who' but also the 'where' and the 'when'. Furthermore, material affinities are very much active, evolving over time, between people/custodians, and spaces. Rather than ending with an in-depth reiteration of the core findings of the book, I want to finish with a more speculative set of ideas on what a focus on the materiality of nothing can offer the three interrelated areas of social science that underpin this book: studies of materiality, debates on consumption and issues of sustainability.

Rethinking materiality: illuminating the 'invisible'

In Chapter 1, I discussed how my work was hugely inspired by theorists who sought to bring about a sea change in studies of consumption to ensure a focus on the 'substance' rather than the 'symbolism' of materials and objects (Gregson and Crewe, 1998). Such scholars enabled what has now been termed

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the 'material turn' and the 'rematerialisation' of social and cultural studies which foregrounded the ordinary, mundane and everyday objects and materials of life (Jackson, 2004: 172). One quote in this genre of research which has always been incredibly poignant for me and which I use repeatedly in teaching and writing is Woodward and Miller's (2007) call to focus on the 'blindingly obvious' stuff around us: the need to pay attention to everyday things that we overlook, take for granted and ignore. In the main, this book has done just that, but I would argue that it has taken the notion of the 'blindingly obvious' a stage further. Quite simply, this is because often the 'materials of nothing' are not at all obvious. They are often invisible, hidden, intangible and, in many cases, physically absent from our possession and surveillance. As illuminated, the materials of nothing can be just as everyday, ordinary and mundane, but they have a particular 'nothingness' quality about them. They can be absent and slippery, and their material nature can be difficult to determine and pin down. Yet their effects – their fibres, textures, patterns and forms (Miller, 2005b) and their histories, biographies and circulations – have a resonance, potency and endurance that, once revealed, can outlast their physical presence or functional use.

In a sense, some of the examples discussed, such as lost objects (Chapter 2), broken favourite items (Chapters 3 and 5), or replicas and stand-ins (Chapter 6), mark a return to the 'symbol over substance' approach. Only this time we have come full circle, and the object and its substance become symbolic in and of themselves. The object is revered because it is lost, because it cannot easily be replaced, because there are no longer other objects available to enable its use or because of the transformative capacities it is now revealing. It is centred because of the affinities that its nothingness enables. I write this final chapter at the time of passing of the UK monarch, Queen Elizabeth II. Whilst this event has unleashed an outpouring of grief from people across the UK and beyond, it has also once again illuminated the significance of stuff. Within days of Queen Elizabeth's passing, conversations were being had in UK homes, on social media and in the press about the many everyday objects which would now have to change because they bared some hallmark of the Queen. Money, stamps, post boxes, government documentation, passports and even some everyday products, such as ketchup or cosmetics made by brands with the royal seal of approval, all needed to change to reflect the passing of one monarch and the reign of another. As a scholar of material culture, I found this sudden focus on these often taken-for-granted and, in some instances, very mundane things fascinating. Stamps or coins will soon be obsolete, so friends talked about saving them for their children, and discussions were had about how long passports and money would be valid. Of course, there is a spectacular symbolism to all of this because of whom they represent, but there is also something revealing about the sudden, shifting potency of these everyday objects. Affinities not just to a person but more widely to a time, an era, a place and a history were seemingly brought to the fore through these quotidian things, not unlike the rave memorabilia discussed in Chapter 2. Thus, this book calls for a deeper engagement with the substance and symbolism of the objects and materials around us and particularly those of nothing: lost objects; disposed-of items; things held in transitional zones; objects in circulation that we may temporarily own, use or access; objects and materials that perform, transform and surprise; decaying things and obsolete items.

Yet, as I have illustrated and as the example above shows, this is more than just centring and valuing the affinities and connections that objects enable us to have to other people. Rather, it is about trying to account for the 'field of relations created by an object' (Bissell, 2009: 109) and the other objects, places and times it connects to. In this regard, this book is aligned with studies of new materialism and the need to account for the plural relationality of objects and materials (Coole and Frost, 2010). Whilst I have focused predominantly on objects as bounded and discrete, the active nature of matter has been core. Indeed, the 'alien power' of matter – the capacity to surprise, transform and perform – has been central throughout (Bennett, 2010: 47). This focus on the emergent and active role of materials has been particularly useful for exploring and developing material affinities. Understanding affinities as active and evolving has enabled the appreciation of relations not just between objects and people but also object to object and how objects connect to different temporalities and spatial settings. Whilst harder to determine, this follow-the-thing type appraisal of affinities has revealed assemblages of objects (Chapters 3 and 4); disconnect and dependences between objects (Chapter 6); and the transformative capacities of the most mundane of matter as it encounters action and moves through different spaces (Chapter 5).

What I hope with this book is that it will further the study of the material affinities of nothing, encouraging engagement with the active, evolving connections that objects and their materials enable. Such an area primed for further research is the affinities associated with object obsolescence and material disconnect. This goes beyond, but no doubt involves, subject–object connections and could illuminate the object dependencies that come hand-in-hand with the swell of digital innovation over the last 30 years and the trail of defunct technologies left in its wake. Similarly, further research which explores affinities in relation to the management of decay and the role of patina would be beneficial, enabling a better understanding of how and why some forms of object decay are celebrated whilst others are stalled and prevented. In sum, focusing on material affinities of nothing enables us to examine the in-depth relationships that we have with material things and why stuff matters so much to us – from the mundane to the spectacular and everything in between. However, leading us to the next contribution of this book, it reveals that we are only ever caretakers of things, regardless of our desire to possess them.

Refocusing consumption: foregrounding the personal

The crisis of accumulation has been a persistent theme throughout this book. This is the idea that everyone has too much stuff and the world is gaping at the seams, unable to cope with the accumulation of waste from our 'throw-away society', not to mention the catastrophic implications of resource depletion to produce all this stuff. The concept of possession has been a thread I have touched upon many times but have not fully developed. Society's desire for material things is rooted in history. Ancient Egyptians were buried with their worldly goods in the belief that they would use them in the afterlife. Prehistoric funerary practices likewise included such 'grave goods'. As Cooper et al. (2022) discuss, 'burial with grave goods was a performance meant to confront mortality' (p. 7), to 'aid passage into an afterlife, providing equipment for the dead, or be a gift to pay a debt' (p. 6). Work on medieval records and wills similarly illuminates the relevance of material things – with the future pathways of items carefully documented to ensure their continuation often within the family (Casson et al., 2023). Thus, objects and the need for possession have had a poignancy and resonance throughout history. Yet there are arguments that this is a Western ideology, and religions such as the ancient Indian religion of Jainism advocate the virtue of *aparigraha* – or non-possession. This concept was promoted by Mohandas K. Gandhi to include only taking what one needs, advocating self-restraint and charitable giving. This non-possessive focus and a shunning of material things have resonance with the voluntary simplicity movement (Martin-Woodhead, 2021) and its drive to possess only what one really needs. This movement shows that there is an inherent morality to non-possession and that to want or desire more than is needed is greedy, excessive and shows a lack of restraint. This fits well with the trope that people do not care about things. They want to consume as much as possible with little regard for the consequences of doing so.

I am reminded of the Hardin (1968) versus Ostrom (1990) debate about 'commoning'. Commoning, in its original form, is the sharing of natural resources (e.g. water and land) so that everyone, rather than the select few, benefits (more contemporary forms of commoning include sharing things such as digital images). In sum, Garrett Hardin (1968) argued that commons are doomed to fail because individualistic motivations and greed always mean that some individuals take more than they need. Elinor Ostrom (1990), in defence, gave examples of numerous successful commons where resources were shared for the collective good without top-down governance and intervention. So, on the one hand, we have individuals who are motivated by greed and who have little consideration for the consequences of their excessive consumption. On the other, communities work together to ensure the sharing of resources and benefit to the collective. These two polarised positions feed into caricatures of contemporary consumers – the greedy, selfish, wasteful individual against the environment-loving, community-spirited collective. But, as this book has demonstrated, this overt simplicity misses the complexity of our relationships with things and the multiplicity of our consumption practices.

Whilst there are those who may throw things away without a second thought, there are also those who feel anxious about the 'right' way to move things along – be that through disposal or some route of further circulation – and such actions really do depend on what that thing is and what it means to us. As I have illustrated, the pathways of objects in our possession are determined by regimes of value which are often underpinned by material affinities (Chapters 3 and 4). Such valuation processes are active – wrapped up in social and cultural norms and personal attachments and contexts. This applies to the museum curator's favourite collection, whose objects get catalogued over others (Chapter 2); the favourite T-shirt which, despite having a hole, lingers in a transitional zone in the home – caught between disposal and repair (Chapter 3); or the handed-down bread knife that's a treasured reminder of family passed (Chapter 4). Such pathways are not linear in the way consumption is regularly presented; rather, goods move back and forth through different stages of consumption, and many more moments of consumption arise than the typical processes of acquisition, appropriation and appreciation, followed by the subsequent devaluation, divestment and disposal. Thus, in terms of debates on consumption, the first contribution that this book makes is to call for greater recognition of the plurality of consumption practices but, furthermore, to pay attention to the role of affinities in object valuation regimes and how this impacts upon the movement of things back and forth through different moments of consumption.

This leads to the second contribution, focused on circulation, and this is in two parts. First, this book has illuminated that circulation is a key element of consumption. Objects move between people (not always owners) in a variety of creative ways and often involve activities which do not meet the usual market mode of provision (Warde, 1992). As I have argued elsewhere (Holmes, 2018a), reciprocity and gifting, sharing and passing on materials, objects and resources are age-old practices of a functioning society. However, often, they too are downplayed because of the well-worn tropes that (a) people do not care for material things and (b) everyone wants only to possess rather than share material things. Moreover, the rise of digital platforms has further paved the way for such collaborative (commoning-like) forms of consumption (Botsman and Rogers, 2011). Whilst the rhetoric and often policies associated with circular economy are quite rightly critiqued for being another 'growth' economy (Hobson, 2021), at the micro, on-the-ground level, circular practices feature in the everyday lives of individuals, households and communities, and they always have.

The second part of this argument is a little more abstract and returns to the complexities of our relationships with things. In one respect, we never truly possess any material object. In the case of Gandhi, the doctrine of non-possession advocates that no one, despite what we may think, possesses anything. Although this doctrine is much wider than material things and is grounded in promoting peaceful and non-exploitative practices throughout life, its resonance for me is that we are only ever the caretakers of the things around us. Stuff outlives and outlasts us. Buried grave goods are unearthed thousands of years after death; buildings, monuments, landscapes, household goods, clothing and jewellery survive beyond us. In Chapter 6, the 150-year-old food item stored in the vault of a museum has outlived all of those who were there at the time it was baked. Obviously, this is dependent on the 'item', its materiality and what happens to it, but the overarching message is that stuff persists. And so too does matter – such as the recycled plastic bottles, discussed in Chapter 5, recycled into gym wear which then release microplastics every time they are washed. Likewise, we have all heard the horror stories of objects in landfills which will take thousands of years to break down. So why are we so bothered about possession if these objects and things continue beyond us and our lifetimes?

Whilst I cannot dismiss the huge significance of post-modernity and the capitalist pursuit of wealth which undoubtedly informs socio-cultural norms around ownership and possession, the answer for me comes back, in part, to affinities and our need to have connections with tangible things. Such affinities have been present as far back in history as pre-historic times, as grave goods illustrate (Cooper et al., 2022). This book has illustrated the connections we have to the things of nothing – lost objects and taken-for-granted, invisible and hidden things. In doing so, it has revealed that affinities persist despite the absence or invisibility of such things. This evokes two thoughts – on the one hand, if we can still have connections with absent things, what does that mean for exploring alternative means of accumulation which do not involve possession or physical, material experience? On the other, as illuminated in the discussion on rejecting digital alternatives (Chapter 6), it also illuminates the persistency of materiality and human desire for tangible, material things. Despite the ease with which one can now download digital music, organise it, play it and even change it, vinyl is still popular and is having a resurgence (Chapter 6). In keeping with notions of the capitalist pursuit of self-interest, this may be because people want to 'show off' their record collection or analogue photograph albums, but as I have demonstrated, there is an inherent focus on the tangible materiality of such items, which digital alternatives simply cannot replicate. Stuff connects us – it binds us to others, to places, to people, to times, memories, imaginaries. This is why some things matter and some do not. Whilst highly personal, a deeper understanding of what matters and why – what needs to be tangible and material and what does not – is one way future studies of consumption and materiality can contribute to debates on sustainability.

Reframing sustainability: knowing when to let go

So if a focus on material affinities and our connections to things enables a better understanding of what matters to people and why – how can we use that to encourage environmentally sustainable practices? Kate Soper's (2007, 2020) work on alternative hedonism offers a starting point. Soper advocates for a redefinition of the good life, to shift away from the confines of capitalism and the focus on gratification from consumer goods. As Soper (2004: 115) notes, '"Alternative hedonism" points to the way in which enjoyment of affluent consumption has become compromised by its unpleasurable by-products (noise, pollution, danger, stress, health risks, excessive waste, and aesthetic impact on the environment)'. She uses the example of the congestion charge brought into effect in London in 2003. Whilst many London residents vehemently opposed the charge, the benefits after its introduction, such as more affordable, reliable public transport, cleaner air, and safer roads, reinforced the decision to impose the charge. Hence, something which was originally opposed by many because of the impact it would have on individual lifestyles was subsequently positively embraced because of the benefit to the collective good. This focus on reframing approaches to consumption and the benefit of incremental changes is noteworthy. This is about making changes to consumption practices (e.g. more opportunities for sharing and circulating) whilst being realistic about people's need for stuff not just for a comfortable existence (and at a basic level to survive) but also by recognising that things matter and have resonance in people's lives.

This is about working out where gains can be made. What objects are people willing to share and circulate? What sorts of things are they able to forgo for digital versions or virtual experiences? At a grander scale, this is about a reframing of ownership. Importantly, this is something we are already seeing. As discussed in Chapter 4, there is a much greater acceptance, particularly from Generation Y and Z, of sharing things – clothes, bikes, cars and homes. This is a move from access as opposed to ownership. In part, this is fuelled by recognising that sharing not only has environmental benefits but also enables one to experience the materiality of things we might not necessarily have the means or resources to own. Whilst this is not entirely unproblematic from a sustainability or ethical point of view, this marks a shift in people's sensibilities towards ownership. Gone are the days when shopping in charity shops or buying second hand could be deemed a marker of exclusion from mainstream consumer culture (Gregson and Crewe, 2003). There has been a seismic shift in attitudes towards sharing and circulating over the past 20 years (Botsman and Rogers, 2011), and this has undoubtedly been enabled by the advent of digital platforms dedicated to sharing and circulating. But, as I have illuminated, whilst these platforms are furthering the growth of sharing and circulating at a more organised and larger scale, these practices have been facets of society for centuries. Thus, if we are to promote sharing and circulating, we need not just to take account of the growing plethora of platform-based sharing and circulating opportunities but also to cultivate, encourage and emphasize the smaller, everyday acts which take place at local, micro levels often between neighbours, households and communities (Holmes, 2018a, 2018b). Umbrellas are a case in point. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, during the Lost Property Project, numerous examples of informal umbrella sharing/circulating schemes were mentioned. Cultural institutions and local train stations discussed informal practices of getting out their stash of lost/abandoned umbrellas from their lost property stores and leaving them out for anyone to take during rainstorms. Similarly, I noticed my local bank branch had a 'borrow a brolly' scheme – enabling customers to take a branded umbrella if caught in the rain. Such informal schemes highlight the possibilities for sharing of everyday objects – it is a case of evaluating what sorts of things people are willing to share.

This is also, though, about encouraging practices of 'letting things go'. In Chapter 2, I discussed how people who had lost items would often rationalise the loss. For some, this was about 'letting the thing go' and imagining the object having a future life with someone else. In the umbrella example, as one participant put it, there is a 'reciprocal umbrella relationship' – those found on public transport are there for anyone to use. 'Letting go' may be harder to encourage than the move to access over ownership – after all, the whole premise of this book is that people become attached to things and that those attachments remain long after those things are gone. They have (potentially) spent money on objects and invested time and energy incorporating them into their lives; hence, letting go is often difficult. I contend that one way to better understand this is through further research on the anxieties of disposal (Chapters 3 and 5). Why do some things cause tension and anxiety when moving to stages of disposal, and how might a better understanding of this enable us to explore opportunities for encouraging letting things go? This is also about a wider societal sea change which emphasizes the only-ever temporary nature of the individual consumption of things.

If we take a firmer stance and return to Soper's example of London's congestion charge, there is also the option of forcing change through legislative or economic measures. The contemporary energy crisis of 2022, brought about by geo-political events, has forced many nations in the Global North to confront their reliance on fossil fuels. At an everyday, micro-level, rising costs have forced households to make significant changes to their practices of energy consumption. There are many ways that households are reducing energy costs. Here are just some of them: limiting the use of central heating; finding other means to heat oneself through layering or blankets; turning appliances off stand-by; using microwaves, air fryers and slow cookers over more energy-intensive appliances such as ovens; and line-drying clothes as opposed to tumble drying. In one respect, this focus and awareness on energy consumption have brought to the fore another materiality of nothing and our connections with it – that of the intangible, unseen matter of energy. However, for the purposes of this concluding chapter, it serves as an example of how change towards more sustainable consumption can be forced and pushed through. In this example, the benefit for the collective good is not as demonstrable as Soper's congestion charge. Indeed, there is the vital argument that such changes will result in significant suffering for many who simply cannot afford to heat their homes. This raises important questions regarding who benefits and who suffers if drastic changes to consumption are enforced. Such consumption inequalities serve as another important area of future research consideration.

I want to end with a final consideration of the possibilities of the materiality of nothing for debates on materiality, consumption and ultimately sustainability. In keeping with the above suggestions that if we can better understand our material relationships with objects and materials we can identify opportunities to reframe our ownership of and engagement with things, my last point is to advocate for greater emphasis on opportunities for slow(er) consumption. As discussed in Chapter 6, slow consumption is determined as a form of consumption which is more mindful and attentive, particularly to the objects and materials we consume and our practices of consuming them. In many ways, its emphasis on experiences and on slow, thoughtful consumption chimes with Soper's (2007, 2020) concept of alternative hedonism. As I highlight, slow consumption is not without critique, not least because of its middle-class focus (those who can afford to consume slowly) and also because of the adoption of experiential consumption and the notion of wellbeing into neoliberal capitalist rhetoric. Nonetheless, many of the examples discussed in this book (particularly the focus on circulation in Chapter 4) are forms of slower consumption. These are activities of what could be termed 'quiet' consumption; they do not require drastic change or the significant perpetuation of inequalities but still have positive environmental and societal impacts. I deliberately borrow here from the growing body of study on quiet activism: 'small, acts of making and doing' that 'critique, subvert and rework dominant modes of production and consumption' (Pottinger, 2017: 215). Whilst slower forms of consumption such as sharing rather than buying, or passing on an item rather than throwing it away, might not be actively undertaken as acts of resistance against dominate modes of consumption, they do challenge the status quo. What is required is a better appreciation of contemporary opportunities for slower consumption (e.g. sharing schemes, repair, reuse and recirculation), alongside systematic future change to enable slower, clearer circulatory pathways for the consumption of objects and materials to become normative, organised features of society.

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