The Intimacy of Objects: Living and Perishing in the Company of Things*

The emotional significance of an object as ‘It’ divorced from its qualitative aspects at the moment presented, is one of the strongest forces in human nature. It is at the base of family affection, and of the love of particular possessions. This trait is not a peculiarity of mankind alone. A dog smells in order to find out if the person in question is that It to which its affections cling. The room, or stable, may be full of odours, many of them for a dog sweeter. But he is not smelling for the pleasure of that smell, but to discover that It who claims his whole affection.

Alfred North Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas, 262

One part of our experience is handy, and definite in our consciousness; also it is easy to reproduce at will. The other type of experience, however insistent, is vague, haunting, unmanageable. The former type, for all its decorative sense experience, is barren. It displays a world concealed under an adventitious show, a show of our own bodily production. The latter type is heavy with the contact of the things gone by, which lay their grip on our immediate selves.

Alfred North Whitehead, Symbolism, 43-44

Nature is the ground, the condition or field in which culture erupts or emerges as a supervening quality not contained in nature but derived from it.

Elizabeth Grosz, Time Travels, p. 44.

In a New York Times review, dance critic Alastair Macaulay writes of the 70-year relationship, both professional and personal, between composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham.¹ The performances he saw included two works by Cunningham to which he had added music written by Cage, who died in 1992. Macaulay notes that during the period when Cunningham composed these dances, he created others having “characteristic ambiguity” and that took up “aspects of death, transcendence, [and] different realms of existence.” Cunningham died in 2009 and his company closed at the end of 2011. The show Macaulay writes about, early in 2012, included eight dancers from that company. He notes the many ghosts he felt that night, both on and beyond the stage, although he does not use that word.

Of the dance called “Doubletoss,” Cunningham’s first new major work after Cage’s death, Macaulay writes that the choreographer’s “own immediate sense of loss is also a constant subtext, but so is the idea that the dead accompany and inspire us,” the living. The dead, he suggests, are here and help carry us forward. He felt this in Cage’s music, put with Cunningham’s choreography as a reproducible set of moves, sights, and sounds, but also in the pairings of men dancers, one of whom he reads as “otherworldly” and who partners and, ironically, enlivens the dancer who appears more "mortal," "earthbound."

¹ Alfred North Whitehead, The Intimacy of Objects: Living and Perishing in the Company of Things, 43-44.
These material pasts and presents reaching out, extending to and entreating us—what Alphonso Lingis called “the imperative”—are felt in Macaulay’s observation that Cunningham is present in the dancers’ “every movement and every phrase”: “Just the firm planting of a bare foot on the floor, seemingly as rooted as a tree, brings back a lost world of Cunningham memories,” he writes. But as Macaulay demonstrates, such memories, such objects, are hardly lost as long as other objects, events, images capable of catalyzing them in particular ways—such as Macaulay himself does in his review—intersect and add something, both old and new, to the now and to the next.

As I read his review, comfortably back in bed with coffee and the paper after breakfast on a chilly late winter morning in Des Moines, I felt this essay, then partially written, and my promise to take up in the revision how present Nancy was, and largely remains, in the innumerable objects and their arrangements that she and I and our marriage of 34 years drew together in particular ways; part of our overlapping lives, practices, psyches, and worlds; all more ... and surely less; still, but not quite, present in that same third floor apartment with a view into the massive branches of large oak trees and a busy urban thoroughfare beyond. I said that I wanted to write about what Steven Shaviro, drawing from Alfred North Whitehead and others, has called “the intimacy of things,” and to underscore how central the seemingly impersonal materiality or “mattering” of life is to fueling that which is, on the contrary, so very personal indeed. But trying to write this story straight, so to speak, seemed to risk missing it all together, or, missing the stories that seemed to press to be told. I’m thus grateful to Macaulay and others, as you will see, for their help in my attempt to write, as Nancy Chen and Trinh Minh-ha might have put it, “nearby.”

Before saying more about Whitehead’s help, I want to address the epigraph by Elizabeth Grosz, above. Grosz’s Time Travels, Patricia Clough’s writing on autoaffection and affect, and the work of Donna Haraway helped me see the importance of dynamic matter for an enlivened cultural theory, aided by Jane Bennett’s two well-known books on this topic. Grosz’s claim, that nature is culture’s ground, can be misread to leave in place the crusty dualism of nature “versus” culture. That surely was, and is, not her intent, but the givenness of this division—as Whitehead made so clear—is long-lived and weighty indeed.

While I have learned much and been a great fan of the insights and arguments from poststructuralism, offered especially in the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, the proverbial “elephant in the room” at the close of arguments derived from their work seemed only more apparent the better I got in making them (or, perhaps it was not “better”). That elephant can be variously named matter, materiality, or, after Pheng Cheah’s trenchant commentary on the work of Judith Butler and Grosz, mattering. For all the brilliance and productivity that the human cognitive capacity for language and the symbolic has enabled, these hardly could shine so brightly without the ground or “soil” of “nature” from and in which it grows and with which it forever remains entwined. Grosz’s choice of metaphor here is key, for it insists on the inseparability of the multiple entities and dynamic processes that ground-and-growth, soil and emergent plantings, mark.
She notes this in her reading of Charles Darwin and Gilles Deleuze, who open thought to how matter may be seen as the provocative "outside" to what cultural theory highlights: the symbolic; meaning, language, and representation. This outside, Grosz writes, is the force that disrupts, intervenes, to break down expectation and to generate invention and innovation, to enable the emergence or eruption of subjectivity or culture. The outside is the (successful or victorious) series of forces that impinge on structures, plans, expectations of the living: this outside appears to us in the form of events, natural and social, and events generate for us the problems that our inventiveness, above all our culture's ingenuity, attempts to address or resolve. For Deleuze, this outside is the force that induces thinking, that shakes life from automatism, that generates culture. This outside, composed of competing forces, forces in the process of their composition, can be called by a number of different names: nature, time, events. It is the force of this outside that incites culture. And in this, "the past and the present are superseded and overwritten by the future." The past thus becomes not causal but rather "an index of the resources that the future has to develop itself differently."  

While Whitehead would not use Grosz's "outside" to describe nature, the view she offers is one that insists on the centrality of the force of Cheah's mattering. I was struck by her reading of "event" as having the capacity to disrupt the orderliness of an established and very sturdy "garden" of cultural growth, cutting away huge swaths of "life as we know it." That seemed to be what had happened to me with Nancy's death.

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Beyond the intimacy of objects as read by Shaviro, Whitehead's work turns on a set of concepts that read as orthogonal to dominant Western philosophy. I here draw on several of those concepts, along with others from scholars and writers who have given objects particular importance in their work and lives. For Whitehead, existence is the dynamic experience that entities have or are: "[T]he whole universe consists of elements disclosed in the analysis of the experiences of subjects." And "subjects" here, please note, includes stones and wasps equally as it does human beings. Whitehead's philosophy of organism thus offers a view of existence that might be called an aesthetic democracy of lively objects. For him, existence is grounded in touching experience and experience is thought as feeling; feeling is mostly physical, and is shared, in varying degree, by all entities.

Given this, "the intimacy of objects" could for Whitehead address the intimacy of stones and wasps themselves; the "prehensions" linking a glass and an ashtray juxtaposed on a bar, human access to which is, at best, limited, the presumptuous lure of phenomenology to the contrary notwithstanding. Unlike much recent work in object-oriented ontology or philosophy, I aim to think here about humans-and-other-things, inextricably linked in a ubiquitous if not always recognized intimacy. Objects are thus seen as causal and, as Timothy Morton argues, "causality is wholly an aesthetic phenomenon." Taking other objects more seriously requires a shift in how we see our human-object selves.
distinct from process or movement. Goodman characterizes as a “rhythmic break flow or (dis)continuum,” or moment multiple, and discrete.”

“[F]or Bachelard,” writes Goodman, “time is fractured, interrupted, multiple, and discrete.” For Bergson, by contrast, the notion of the singular instant or moment of time is illusory. With his concept of the extensive continuum, which Goodman characterizes as a “rhythmic break flow or (dis)continuum,” Whitehead dissolves the dualism of space versus or distinct from time, of form versus or distinct from process or movement, and, as with William James, Goodman says, “the relation between things assumes as much significance as the things themselves.”
It is from this sense that Whitehead insisted, “There is a becoming of continuity, but no continuity of becoming.”

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Macaulay of course alludes to the personal intimacy between Cunningham and Cage. I read his sense of that intimacy in the allusion to the sound of Cage’s music and the dancers’ moves, although both men insisted on the independence of music and choreographed movement; and to the linked movements of arms, heads, torsos, and the “planted feet” of the dancers, on the one hand, and Cunningham himself, on the other; in the otherworldly-and-the-mortal. The presence of love, loss, joy, pain, difference; “stubborn fact”—a term Whitehead takes from his reading of Descartes and Locke—and potential that Macaulay brought to me, from his own experience of a public event far away, served as a relay to my project. His phrase “a bare foot on the floor,” put just so—I felt this image, having seen Cunningham on stage—leads me to think of how, when I am with Nancy’s brother John, a few years older than she (we had no children, in whom this point might be made even more clearly, or not), a certain tilt of his head, a chuckle punctuating a phrase, feeds an ineffable sense of recognition that is a presence of “Nancy herself”; not so much a memory of her, if we think “memory” only as ideational, but rather a bodily experience called forth in, solicited from, me of her presence in the details of her brother’s movements and how they touch me in the here-and-now or the then and there of those strands of timespace. Imperativity; evocation; vectors of affectivity coming my way.

It is as though one timespace opens up inside another, moving along a different vector; the distinctive head, the same chuckle, the shape of the nose draw me along without words. I think Macaulay’s sense of a foot put just so is also less about memories—at least as solely representational—and more a matter of feeling, of the aesthetic; of being touched and reaching to touch back; a question of the promise of thinking together intimacy, body, and—to use words that have become so important in recent writing on materiality and life—the aesthetic of objects’ linked experience and of their affect. Or perhaps we can think this with what Bergson called “true memory” as distinct from and in connection to perception. The latter occurs, he held, in the unfolding present project pursued by the embodied and sentient being, moving through the world. It has an agenda, one might say. The former interrupts perception and slows its linear project as part of the presence of the past in the human’s now and its particular relevance to the object perceived.

In reference to Bergson, Grosz suggests that “If memory directs me to the past and to duration, then it is linked not only to my body and its experiences but to the broad web of connections in which my body is [and has been] located.” Perception, says Grosz, links to location, while memory is about duration. And “[t]he more immersed we are in memory,” she writes, “the less our actions can be directly invoked and prepared for [by us]; but the more directly and instrumentally we act, the less our reflection, memories, and consciousness intervene into and regulate our actions.” When Macaulay sees the Cunningham foot, because he knows it and has been with it in the past, true memory, through his body and the seen foot, come together and the present opens elsewhere, even if ever so fleetingly,
to the past, on its way forward to the future. "Minimally," writes Morton, "action at a distance is just the existence-for-the-other of the sensual qualities of any entity."25

Nancy Claire Harper Schneider, 62, died Saturday, 18 November, at home from complications associated with a recurrence of breast cancer first diagnosed in 1999. That’s what I wrote in the obituary. Nancy died very suddenly and, I hope very quickly, at about 3:10 a.m. that morning in 2006 as she sat on my lap on the bed—the same bed I mention above, where I first read Macaulay’s review—and as I struggled unsuccessfully to lift her into a wheelchair nearby. She had awakened me and asked if I could help her to the bathroom. She had become so weakened from the endless chemotherapy and the cancer that we had turned to the chair for help. She clasped my neck and I held her under the arms to stand, but when she stood up she collapsed under the effort. As her body fell back onto the bed, I somehow turned us and slid under her, ending up facing her back, seated with her on my lap. The spreading warm wetness on my thighs and running down my legs—"I need to go to the bathroom but I can’t get up. Can you help me?"—stopped my breath. "Oh, God. No!" I think I cried.

The phone. 911. Hurry, hurry please! But I knew or thought I knew it couldn’t matter now. Holding and feeling and living her dying in that very “intimate” way—I can’t think of a more fitting word—was a break of some kind in my life; the event dividing time and place into a before and an after. To see death on a face that you know and love and have studied for such a long time is—to say the least—disconcerting and even frightening. Freud’s “uncanny.” She was just here, but the face here now is not hers. Miles from “home,” for sure. I tried CPR and, as Shakespeare’s Juliet cried at her last Romeo kiss, “Thy lips are warm!”

Two and a half months later, on February 3, 2007 in Sarasota, Florida, my mother’s body, or, my second mother’s body, lay still and lifeless from the victory of another life, related but of a different sort, called lung cancer. Her face and body had been becalmed by the hospice staff: hair combed, mouth and eyes drawn closed, bedcovers smoothed, and the room ordered—it was indeed a “viewing” that my brother and I did as we sat beside her last bed; where, just hours before, the life called Sara Schneider—"bare" though it then was, was still nonetheless present. That is not how it was with Nancy and me at 3:10 a.m. on November 18, 2006. The word trauma easily comes to mind or to bodymind. There was no sitting nearby.

I was invited to submit a proposal for this collection because one of the editors heard me present a conference paper that seemed relevant to its theme. That first, brief essay was written for a panel to honor a new book by a former colleague, Allen Shelton, titled Dreamworlds of Alabama, which draws centrally on memories of his early life growing up and living there. Allen knew Nancy since he and I were in the same department for a time. When I think of him, I can easily think of the three of us, seated at a table in a favorite coffeehouse, talking and laughing about our everyday lives and pasts. I gave the conference paper in 2008, a little more two years after Nancy’s death. That writing and reading were accompanied by feelings of sorrow and pain, but also a sense of relief at being able to write and speak from those feelings and that experience. Not, surely, a matter of “getting
beyond” or banishing them so much as a way to acknowledge or “voice” and weave them into the shifting story of myself. Cathartic, I think, would be a fitting term for that writing/performance, but that perhaps overcodes for off-loading, when it seems, even now, more an expansion, an affirmation of a becoming that I felt so deeply but that no one or few could see when they saw “me.”

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The conference panel asked us to choose a paragraph from Allen’s book that resonated with us and that he then would read aloud before we spoke. I did not set out then to write about Nancy’s death and how important objects would be in bringing her back into my life and giving it ground. As I looked through Allen’s book to see what bits I had marked, I chose his comments about a very complex and lively backyard garden—another figure of ground-and-growth-from—where he once lived:

The garden is a border between a series of interlocked structures, which are twined together like honeysuckle around a sapling. The bare branch stretched like a network of arms about to bud across the kitchen window. The flat, white cut of the pruner visible on the branches, a red wagon turned on its side on a gravel path, through the glass to a bowl of Honey Nut Cherrios and an Oneida spoon. The garden retains a history and the accumulation of debris and markings on the ground. The spade cut, the pruned branch, the scar on the hand, the rotting compost retains the compositional structure of Freud’s simile but gives it a more personal, smaller radius. The garden stands for an aboresque and more human vegetative mind alongside Freud’s metropolitan equation. The intertwining of the family with the commercial and bureaucratic triangles begins as soon as the doorknob is turned and the man mistakes his wife for a straw hat. At the same time a floral surrealism blooms in the margins. Instead of following streets and monuments in an archeological dig, the garden simile develops the lilac into a new patient for analysis. The lilac has a history that is personal as well as genetic. It is an actant with stories to tell. The lilac talks in the same language as the unconscious connected to the Irish shovel connected to the habituation of the body parts at the end of the ash handle. The commodity trails meld with dreams to make possible a new archeology that Freud didn’t quite see. There is still the repressed. A Kafka-like mother and father lurking in the background, but the garden is a different kind of oedipal site. Plants, objects, and bodies are not separate but are wrapped systems with stories originating as much out of the actant as the actor. The shovel gardens. The gardener is another tool in an oedipal archeology.27

Allen’s passage evoked my own sense of how memories of Nancy were and are so entwined with, even in, things, objects—commodities or not—and particular places, that/where, when I find myself around/in them, draw me to her in pointed ways for which the word “memory” again seems not enough or needs to be specified. A bare foot, planted just so.

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But this essay really started with a book by the well-known non-fiction writer, Joan Didion. Before Whitehead there was Didion; at least for me. I knew the
name Joan Didion from her reputation as an incisive and critical observer of contemporary American politics and society. But when I noticed a brief account of her book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, I read on, primed by age and circumstance. I mean, I was already more than 60 and had plenty of experience with death and illness of those dear to me. Nancy had been diagnosed with a recurrence of the cancer that was discovered in 1999 but that we thought/hoped was “cured”—a word that the beloved oncologist apparently believed in since he had used it to describe my own cancer experience (admittedly, with the quotes in place)—until Nancy’s cancer wasn’t and was back five years and several months later, growing in her right lung “in an inoperable place,” they said. I remember her saying that day, as we sat waiting to “take more pictures” of her lung, “But I feel so good.” Life itself; but not, as it turned out, hers.

Didion tells the story of her life after the sudden “cardiac event” that brought the death of her husband, life partner, muse, colleague, beloved, John Gregory Dunne; at dinner at home on the upper east side of Manhattan at about 9:00 o’clock on the night of December 30, 2003. I was drawn to the book because I knew Didion would not shy from the dark and difficult that I feared would come to me. She would face the pain straight, with no “pretty words” and with skepticism for the received wisdom about how to go on … after. She did not disappoint:

*Life changes fast.*

*Life changes in the instant.*

*You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.*

*The question of self-pity.*

Life as you know it ends, but of course she does not mean that she died. She lived on, but life as the Joan Didion she was before this event had ended. Let’s start at the beginning of that ending (although Whitehead might remind us that being itself is the beginning of that ever-ending, which, isn’t after all a final end; all of which strikes me now, almost six years on, as somewhat comforting, although it would not have done so then, as I lay in bed reading Didion, catching myself not breathing; Nancy asleep beside me). And Whitehead also might respond to Didion’s claims about life by saying, *sotto voce*, that is the way it is with life, with existence: it often changes fast and is indeed never as it was, just a moment ago. Living-and-existence: a perpetual creation and perishing; things never quite what they seem.

No surprise then that my classical yoga text advises *aparigraha*, non-grasping or non-hoarding; “not to collect things one does not require immediately.” Non-stealing. But then, Whitehead reminds, life, even existence, is robbery. And we do not easily give up what we thus have taken and think is ours.

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So here is Didion, starting at the beginning of the end, when they had just returned from seeing their daughter in the hospital. She interrupts herself to reflect on her experience of “being there” across a series of events involving a range of objects and places that had helped constitute her life—with John-Gregory-Dunne, the most important of which was of course Dunne himself. Her disdain for the professional knowledge (about which Whitehead had much critical to say) she found, produced far from those experiences but presuming to know them
nonetheless, is palpable. As I read her words I felt she spoke what might have been my own:

“December 30, 2003

We had seen Quintana in the sixth-floor ICU at Beth Israel North.

Where she would remain for another twenty-four days.

Unusual dependency (is that a way of saying ‘marriage’? ‘husband and wife’? ‘mother and child’? ‘nuclear family’?) is not the only situation in which complicated or pathological grief can occur. Another, I read in the literature is one in which the grieving process is interrupted by ‘circumstantial factors,’ say by ‘a delay in the funeral,’ or by ‘an illness or second death in the family.’ I read an explanation by Vamik D. Volkan, M.D., a professor of psychiatry at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, of what he called ‘re-grief therapy,’ a technique developed at the University of Virginia for the treatment of ‘established pathological mourners.’ In such therapy, according to Dr. Volkan, a point occurs at which:

we help the patient to review the circumstances of the death—how it occurred, the patient’s reaction to the news and to viewing the body, the events of the funeral, etc. Anger usually appears at this point if the therapy is going well; it is at first diffused, then directed toward others, and finally directed toward the dead. Abreactions—what Bibring ... calls ‘emotional reliving’—may then take place and demonstrate to the patient the actuality of his repressed impulses. Using our understanding of the psychodynamics involved in the patient’s need to keep the lost one alive, we can then explain and interpret the relationship that had existed between the patient and the one who died.

But from where exactly did Dr. Volkan and his team in Charlottesville derive their unique understanding of ‘the psychodynamics involved in the patient’s need to keep the lost one alive,’ their special ability to ‘explain and interpret the relationship that had existed between the patient and the one who died’? Were you watching Tenko with me and ‘the lost one’ in Brentwood Park, did you go to dinner with us at Morton’s? Were you with me and ‘the lost one who died’ at Punchbowl in Honolulu four months before it happened? Did you gather up plumeria blossoms with us and drop them on the graves of the unknown dead from Pearl Harbor? Did you catch cold with us in the rain at the Jardin du Ranelagh in Paris a month before it happened? Did you skip the Monets with us and go to lunch at Conti? Were you with us when we left Conti and bought the thermometer, were you sitting on our bed at the Bristol when neither of us could figure out how to convert the thermometer’s centigrade reading to Fahrenheit?

Were you there?

No.

You might have been useful with the thermometer but you were not there.

I don’t need to ‘review the circumstances of the death.’ I was there.

I didn’t get ‘the news,’ I didn’t ‘view’ the body. I was there.”

She goes on to note the extent to which death in our variously modern world has been erased from the everyday of life, along with, especially, mourning and the embodiment of grief. We are enjoined from creating circumstances that spoil the “enjoyment” of others and even of ourselves; and death, surely, can do that. We are
supposedly good at “moving on,” “getting closure.” As the mid-twentieth century Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong once wrote of the United States, we are—sadly, he thought—a “land without ghosts,” in no small part because we, he felt, discard the past and deny its presence in us, truncating what the future might bring. 

So, what about that part of Didion’s life that ended that night at dinner, in an instant? That part of her that was him that was her that remains at Brentwood Park? At the Punchbowl in Honolulu? What about that part of her in his shoes in their closet? In his favorite pen, left next to his favorite chair after he wrote that note last night when they discussed a problem he was having with an essay (perhaps before they went to the hospital to see their daughter)? His finger prints would still be there; his DNA perhaps, if he had chewed on the pen absent-mindedly. And there was his smell as she stepped into his side of their closet. In all of these, Didion registers her aesthetic experience as a ground for knowing that takes precedence over the cognitive knowing that the experts offer. She was there.

I have a Nancy’s closet that carries her smell and that saddens me to the core each time I step in to get something I’ve stored there in this rather sealed off space that, nonetheless, I can’t quite bear to make into something else. And the bed is still here, the pillows, the sheets and mattress pad; the lamp, the table. Her dresser, now acting as a storage unit for things I can’t decide what to do with. The carpet near the bed is here as well, where two large stains of Nancy’s blood had fallen when the medics put a tube down her throat, trying to give her breath. One of the giant fire fighters said to me—they all seemed so big; I felt so small, shivering bare footed in my bathrobe—“there was blood in her lungs when we put the tube in,” as if to say hopeless. After several days, I covered the stains with a towel and finally, weeks later, washed them away one night as Meiling the white cat Nancy gave me sat, looking on. The white cat is a whole other story of intimacy and affect ... and fear of more loss. All of these things, for sure, where there with me that morning.

Some of them, like the blood, were or bore such a part of her and that 22 month period of cancer’s relentless return that I could not bear to have them when I never would have her again. After the funeral home men took her that morning, I could hardly look at and touch her toothbrush, her make-up brushes, the hairbrush, offering me strands of her chemotherapy-shocked hair. Un-bear-able, literally. Other of these things that were part of that terrible morning and remain seem to comfort me; they carry her to me when I am with them and are thus precious. I have a version of this same response to some of Nancy’s dear friends who also loved her. Although I do not see these women much, when our paths cross, we always conjure Nancy, almost without words, and our tears are suddenly there as well. That brings me back to the uncanny and to ghosts.

While Freud’s unheimlich or uncanny (literally, un-homely; thinkable as the un-familia-r) seemed right when Nancy’s face was no longer the face I knew, or was not quite, it carries too much a sense of fear and menace to describe my connection to these other objects. Living with—in the company of—these things has been, admittedly, full of nostalgia but not at all frightening. Even my dreamscape, to which I ordinarily have only the dimmest waking connection, brings no disturbing narratives or images of Nancy (at least that I can read).
If the uncanny codes too negatively, the presence of ghosts and haunting have a distinct resonance. I had forgotten that I once wrote about living in a land of ghosts, that is, in China. While focused then mostly on how the ghost of the xiaozi or filial son haunts boys and men in their relationships with parents even today, I learned that ghosts, primarily in the form of “ancestors” and their particular places and things, could be very comforting presences, helping humans remember who they are and what they owe.38 And while of course frightful if angered by disrespectful behavior from the living, these Chinese ghosts seemed to provide those same living with an ongoing sense of connection and embrace with the past.

This is what the anthropologist Fei felt was missing in America. He once visited at the University of Chicago, where he occupied the temporarily vacant office of the famous Chicago School sociologist, Robert Park, who had been Fei’s teacher many years before when Park visited China. He was particularly concerned to maintain its material details just as the professor had left them, as if better to draw, respectfully and with efficacy, from their accumulated Parkian resonance.

I was secretly happy that, sitting in the chair he had used, I would surely absorb something of his spirit .... I felt that if the nameplate, the old books lining the walls, even the air in the room were not disturbed, then, surrounded by this lingering past, perhaps in a few months I would see a draft of [my book] ... on the table. But that if these were disturbed, all might be lost.39

And there is the very long history in Chinese thought and practice, on which Fei no doubt draws, that takes what Jane Bennett has called “the enchantment” of the world; its very liveliness, as Donna Haraway might put it; or its mattering, as a given.40 My Chinese friends, I felt sure, would understand the intimacy of objects.

Christopher Bollas claims that psychoanalysis “concentrates on the daily ‘trip’ which we all take,” as embodied beings in real timespace, “stimulated by desire, need, memory and emotional life.”41 He credits Freud’s attention to our experience of the quotidian that is recalled during free association as one of his greatest contributions to understanding psychic processes. In his *The Evocative Object World*, Bollas summarizes much of his prior work on this intersection of objects—primarily, but not only, other humans—and patients seeking therapy. His use of the adjective “evocative” takes us to the heart of my essay. As you have seen, I am suggesting that while we know humans have amazing capacities to evoke, to call or summon forth—to affect—to “make happen,” we are less aware of or prepared to say that such evocative capacity comes to us humans from non-human and especially non-living objects.

In a chapter that takes the book’s title as its own, Bollas stories a thread of his late work as reaching toward such an appreciation. Sounding a bit like some of the object-oriented scholars noted earlier, Bollas writes, “The object world—its ‘thinginess’—is crucial to our use of it. As we move about, we live in an evocative object world that is only so because objects have an integrity of their own.”42 Here and subsequently Bollas seems to grant these other objects with which or whom we share context—and Whitehead would insist on this foundational relationality—an “in itselfness” from which comes the capacity to affect us, in the sense of an
initiatory movement or vector not beginning only in the human. But it turns out that is not quite the case: “Those objects leave an imprint in our unconscious that is partly the property of the thing-itself and *mostly* the result of the meaning within our individual self” (my emphasis).43 And, writing specifically about what he calls the destiny drive, he notes ‘how after one passes away we leave behind ‘personal effects’: the trace of those objects we *used* in our life that *fulfilled* (or perhaps did not) the needs of *that drive*’ (my emphasis).44

The object that seems most interesting to Bollas then turns out to be the internal object, either in its conscious meaning for us or in its play in the unconscious. While he has much interesting to say about objects, psychoanalysis of course does not—fortunately—set out to treat the turbulence of rocks and humans equally. Such a reading of my experience around and after Nancy’s death would be valid on its own terms and perhaps even helpful to me in my life, but it would not shine as bright a light on the non-human objects in themselves as I have tried to do.

Sherry Turkle, who writes with more than a little insight into psychoanalysis, has edited a collection of essays called *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* and contributes the introduction, titled “The Things That Matter.”45 She locates the collection of papers relative to a long scholarly “reticence to examine objects as centerpieces of emotional life,” and adds that Western “knowing” itself codes strongly as abstract.46 For Turkle, Freud and the psychodynamic tradition enable us to see more clearly “the intensity of our connections to the world of things” and “how we relate to the animate and inanimate” in similar ways.47 Perhaps because she is not a clinician but rather a scholar of the person-in-society-culture, Turkle’s comments seem to give more warrant to the object-in-itself than those from Bollas, even if, finally, she also turns to the “internal object” as the object of interest.48

She speaks of a “memory closet” in her grandparents’ Brooklyn apartment that had a “smell and feel” all of its own and that contained a collection of family things—mementos, photographs, trinkets, postcards, jewelry—that she was allowed as a child to take down and hold, arrange, and be with. These objects, she says, helped her know both who her grandparents, parents, and she herself were. In the collected essays, Turkle says, the authors write stories of objects as “companions” to their own “life experience.”49 And, although only as an aside, she connects this work to a late-twentieth century line of scholarly writing that emerged before the object-oriented work noted here and that opened thinking about objects truly in their own right. In that footnote reference, Turkle unwittingly brings us back to Whitehead.

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This is so not only because of Whitehead’s attention to objects but also because Turkle references the late twentieth century tradition of writing in science studies that takes “the concrete” as having, to use Karen Barad’s term, an “agential” capacity.50 But before Barad there was Haraway and Bruno Latour, two science studies scholars whose work has importantly shaped that field of study from 1980 forward. Both Latour and Haraway acknowledge thoroughgoing insight gained from reading Whitehead, insight that is apparent in Latour’s trenchant critique of the social and sociological concepts and his actor-network theory, giving central place to his term “actant” (rather than “actor”) and in Haraway’s rejection of the bifurcation of nature, insisting on “natureculture” and the promiscuous and messy
relationality from her famous cyborg to her dog-human and other companion species amalgams.51

We can draw a line from this Whitehead—Haraway—Latour work that touches what Bolas and Turkle, for instance, have to say about objects. But the risk of doing so is that precisely the point so important to the object-oriented and related scholars and to the story I tell here of living in the company of things, namely, the “in-itselfness” first of non-human and then non-living objects—their affectivity as generators and receptors of Whitehead’s “feeling” or the aesthetic—is obscured by the shadow of the human and of life. I have tried here to avoid that dominating presence even as I have insisted on the connection thereto as the matter at hand. My experience of Nancy’s death and, no doubt, the almost two years before it during cancer’s return (or new arrival—I was never sure), has been full of an abiding awareness of how important the intimacy of a range of objects has been in supporting my life into the now from the then, which is also here. I don’t know if it would have been different if she had died without warning in a car crash and/or our relationship had been deeply fraught. Would “our” objects then have acted differently in their aesthetic connection to me? Whitehead likely would say of course.

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The question of going on, of becoming; as if it were really a question about which there could be a question at all. For, even in death, life, existence, continues. As Didion writes, perhaps more poignantly than she could know, quoting the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, “In the midst of life, we are in death.”52 Of course, we think we already know this. Life and death are entwined as each other’s limit; a provocative, sophisticated idea. But knowing it and living it, in the midst, in the flesh, with the matter of life and death breathing and pulsing together—and then not. That’s another matter. Here, the verb to know doesn’t quite convey how it feels. Whitehead’s insistence that existence is aesthetic before it is cognitive strikes me as compelling. So perhaps it is precisely the liveliness of these particular “Nancy things” in my life—and of things, matter, more generally—that he and others who have written on/for objects have foregrounded, that bring me comfort and a sense of existential enmeshness.53 If, as Bolas suggests with his notion of aesthetic dejection, that certain objects bring only aversive experience for other human objects (for him, apparently, one such is the city of Copenhagen), we might then think of a whole realm of connections between objects that could be called, using Whitehead’s term, “satisfying,” which carries a flavor of intensity that he might applaud.

Just as I am finishing this final draft, I have looked again at a short essay by Nancy’s brother, John Harper, called “The End of the Dock.” Resonant with memories of the past and the summers he spent growing up at a family cottage on a northwest Iowa lake, he tells of a private and secret place at the end of the family boat dock where, only at night and alone, he often searched the dark and starry sky to glimpse his future from the details of his life so far. The figure of a sweet younger sister who always seemed to be the emotional rudder of his family moves in and out of the frame. He writes, some fifty years after he first found/made this private place, of the two of us, making our way to the end of the dock on a chilly and drizzly

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September day. We were there with the last portion of Nancy’s ashes to say our final good-bye and to leave some part of her at a place that she also loved. His words bring my story of the intimacy of objects to a close:

Joseph opens the bag, digs a hand into it, and then passes it to me. Cremains are invariably filled with sharp edges and bone fragments, and are a dull grey color. But Nancy’s are all a fine ivory-color powder, such a delicate consistency. They adhere to my palms and fingers as I toss several handfuls into the choppy water below. We stand there in silence for a while, sharing a good cry ... [then] drive back into town to eat lunch before the long journey home. But I can’t bring myself to wash my hands.... Nancy is present, a part of me in a way she hasn’t been since her death more than ten months ago. I resolve that I must come back to my special place one more time, but at night.

* Conversations with Patricia Clough about materiality and theory have been enormously important in thinking this essay. Thanks also to Richard Abel, Barbara Hodgdon, and Janet Wirth-Cauchon for helpful comments on earlier drafts. This essay published in Intimacies: A New World of Relational Life, Alan Frank, Patricia Ticineto Clough, Steven Seidman (eds.). New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 259-274.
Schneider, “The Intimacy of Objects”

6 Cheah, “Mattering.” Vicki Kirby has written specifically to these issues of materiality from a Derridean and poststructuralist view. See her Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

7 Grosz, Time Travels, 49.

8 Grosz, Time Travels, 38.


11 See Ian Bogost, Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like To Be a Thing (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).


15 Whitehead, Process, 105. And then he writes: “It is at this point that with life morals become acute. The robber requires justification.”


17 These capacities as the definition of affect are traceable back through Clough, The Affective Turn, and Brian Massumi, Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) to Deleuze and Spinoza.


19 Goodman, Sonic, 91.

20 Whitehead, Process, 35.


22 Herni Bergson, Matter and Memory, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone, 1991 [1908]). And see the films of Agnès Varda, especially The Beaches of Agnès, for another sense of this.

23 Grosz, Time Travels, 97.

24 Grosz, Time Travels, 97. As Grosz notes, Bergson was fascinated by this space between the cognitive or ideational/representational of memory, on the one hand, and the body and bodily matter required for memory to exist, on the other, a division Whitehead would erase in his critique of bifurcation, a point Goodman addresses.

Morton argues that objects should be seen as dialetheic, embracing the claim that some contradictions can be true and that appearance and reality not only can be at odds but in fact are. That is, an object in its complex dynamism is both what it seems and not; its essence is not its appearance. “An object is therefore both itself and not-itself, at the very same time,” Morton, “Objects in Mirror,” 17.


Bollas, *The Evocative*, 79


Sherry Turkle, ed. *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007). Much of Turkle’s work looks at the relationship between humans and machines, especially computers; and see her recent discussion of personal robots or


52 Didion, *The Year*, 5. Some sixteen months after Dunne’s death, Didion was to face another personal tragedy in the death of their daughter, Quintana Roo Dunne Michael, from the long and relentless infection alluded to in the long quote I include from *The Year: Blue Nights* (New York: Knopf, 2011) writes the story of Didion’s life after her daughter’s death, with characteristic force.

53 This is Morton’s term, from “Objects in Mirror.”