



Chapter **07**

Stored in a Red Briefcase: Unpacking the Affectivity and Fluctuating Value of Memory Objects

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Materialities play an active role in ‘triggering and shaping recollection’ and linking humans and ideas across time and space (Rigney 2017:474). Memory objects, as one particular materiality, ‘fascinate through their shape, texture, colour and size’ and ‘promise us stories by outliving the time in which they first came into being’ (Rigney 2017:474). Recently, I dedicated my doctoral thesis to exploring the relationships between humans and objects (Loots 2022). The study grew from my lifelong fascination with the tales told by mundane objects through their entanglements with memories and humans. Memory objects can be described as any object that belongs to someone, usually as a form of remembrance and commemoration of an event or relationship. Such objects are not necessarily functional but could be and are predominantly valued for their sentimental value (Gordon 1986:135; Hatzimoyis 2003:373). As objects that capture relations and past events commonly through meticulous care, memory objects are undoubtedly often associated with notions such as inheritance and obsession. A central theme in this book is the ‘obsessive’ preservation of inherited objects in museum archives. In this chapter, I turn away from the museum space and turn towards an intimate, informal home space to unpack, physically and theoretically, objects in a private collection.

The study’s research process included conducting interviews with twenty-one participants, during which we discussed, amongst other things, their memory objects. Before each interview, I asked each participant to think about memory objects they kept (if they did) and would be willing to share details about on the day of our conversation. Some memory objects discussed in the interviews included heirlooms such as furniture, quilts and rings; travel souvenirs such as mugs, earrings and fridge magnets; found objects such as coins and glass bottles; self-actualising objects such as paintings, flutes and diaries; spaces, such as gardens and cities; and experiences, such as holidays

or family rituals. The transmission of possessions, knowledge, and rituals ‘contaminated’ with previous owners’ affective qualities reveals social practices’ inner workings and how objects constitute and enrich social identities over time. Analysing the qualitative interviews unveiled diverse themes associated with memory objects, including family lineage, tourism, value, life experiences, death, transience, and time (Loots 2022).

In this chapter, I provide short descriptions of participants’ relations with objects and home in one interview in particular. During the conversation with Nicholas,¹ the affectivity evoked by and the malleable value of memory objects from his childhood came to the fore especially. I arrived at Nicholas’s Pretoria home on a sunny Friday morning in March 2019. He guided me to a wooden table overlooking a garden. On the table was a bright red briefcase, closed. The briefcase, I soon learnt, previously belonged to his mother, was used to store most of his childhood memory objects and was a sentimental object itself (Figure 7.1). Throughout this chapter, set out in three sections, I refer to narratives from our interview² to sketch memory objects’ affectivity and fluctuating value.

Firstly, I provide a brief historical overview of the theoretical framework used in this chapter, namely the new materialisms. This informs a new materialist analysis (following Fox & Alldred 2015, 2017) that is useful in introducing the ambivalences surrounding human/nonhuman relations, affective flows and materialities’ fluctuating value. The chapter’s two remaining sections are framed by two interlinking questions:

- What affective flows between memory objects and Nicholas emerged during the interview?
- How did objects’ perceived fluctuating value shape Nicholas’s engagement with them?

¹ Pseudonyms were self-selected by the participants. ² The interview with Nicholas was conducted in Afrikaans after which I translated it into English. For the original Afrikaans quotations and more on the translation process see Chapters 7 and 8 of my doctoral thesis (Loots 2022).

These questions are unpacked by referring to two theories associated with the new materialisms: 'affect theory' as theorised by, amongst others, Deleuze (1995), Seigworth and Gregg (2010), Massumi (1995), and Hemmings (2005) and Maurizia Boscagli's (2014) 'stuff theory'. Firstly, when it comes to affect, one must trace objects' potency, which lies in the recognition that it is at once 'flighty and hardwired, shifty and unsteady but palpable too' (Stewart 2007:3). Studying affect, Kathleen Stewart (2007:1) notes, must be approached as 'an experiment, not a judgment'. In the final section, I argue that Boscagli's (2014) use of the term 'stuff' appropriately highlights matter's plasticity, transformative potential, and inextricable ties with the human. I conclude by summarising the discussion and briefly reflecting on the new materialisms.

Framing: New materialisms

The term 'new materialisms' emerged in the mid-1990s as a method, conceptual frame, and political strategy (Braidotti 2012:16). William Connolly (2013:399) describes it as the 'most common name given to a series of movements' that criticise anthropocentrism by rethinking human and nonhuman forces and processes, by exploring the dissonant relations between those processes and cultural practice and by rethinking sources of ethics. Taking matter 'more seriously' is one of the movement's chief projects (Adkins 2015:11). The term has been used increasingly to 'stress the concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations of power', especially by challenging binaries such as human/nonhuman, culture/nature, and mind/matter (Braidotti 2012:16).

The new materialisms were partly inspired by Gilles Deleuze's reading of seventeenth century philosophers Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. In contrast to other modern materialists, Spinoza and Leibniz thought all matter was defined by an immanent capacity or power (Gamble, Hanan & Nail 2019:119). New materialists have taken up this tradition to move beyond the ancient and modern mechanistic materialist treatments of matter as the passive object of external forces. The renewed interest in materialism over the last few decades can thus, to some degree, be seen as a 'return' to and reinterpretation of such existing philosophical ideas.

As a domain within posthumanism that attends to matter by rejecting dichotomous understandings, the new materialisms developed as a response to the linguistic turn. Some thinkers within this turn focus on discourse at the expense of the material. From this grew an entangled

material-discursive philosophy where epistemology, ontology and ethics imbricate (Barad 2007). The material turn has since, at least in part, been informed by poststructuralist, feminist, postcolonialist, and queer theories, which are committed to reconceptualising the subject and mapping the 'ethics of relationality' (Braidotti 2006:24–25; Gamble, Hanan & Nail 2019:130–31; Dolphijn & Van der Tuin 2012:86). Due to the multiplicity of intellectual currents that flow through new materialist work, some theorists take issue with its characterisation as 'new', suggesting that one thinks instead in terms of 'conceptual infusions' into an emerging programme of materially-informed thought and practice (Massumi 2002:4; Jones & Hoskins 2016:79).

Emerging twenty-first century perspectives that call for a re-evaluation of human/object relations form part of a long history of engaging with the matter. Common in Euro-American philosophical tradition is erecting divisions between the human and the nonhuman, or between knowing *subjects* on the one hand and *objects* of knowledge on the other. These two 'classes of entities' are considered different (Law 2004:132). The new materialisms challenge such binaries by seeing human bodies and all other social, material, and abstract entities in relation to one another and therefore move away from conceptions of objects and bodies as occupying distinct spaces. This shift emphasises the flows produced *through* the relationship between bodies, things, and ideas (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:261). Deepening an understanding of the deliberately constructed nature of binary relations—or materiality as 'put in place'—has 'far-reaching cultural, social, and political possibilities' (Boscagli 2014:14).

Precisely because the new materialisms typically comment on crucial issues of materiality, embodiment, and subjectivity, these theories can contribute to the current renewal of interest in realist perspectives (that there exists a 'real' world independent from a human's perceptions, theories, and constructions of it) (Braidotti 2012:16). In short, the new materialisms foreground 'what it means to exist as a material individual with biological needs' inhabiting a world as one object among many objects (Coole & Frost 2010:28). From this brief background it becomes clear that the eclecticism and historically rich ideas that inform the new materialisms have the potential to productively dissolve (or at least soften) human/nonhuman boundaries. To illustrate what the perspectives made possible by the new materialisms might look like, I now turn to a new materialist analysis of the interview with Nicholas.



Figure 7.1. Nicholas's briefcase that belonged to his mother. It is used to store memory objects from his youth. 29 March 2019. Photograph by Olivia Loots.

New materialist analysis: Nicholas and the briefcase

According to Jamie Lorimer (2013:62–63), a ‘clear-sighted’ new materialist research approach encompasses at least three interwoven strands. Firstly, it is committed to sustained interrogations of the modern divisions that determine which forms have agency. This commitment can be honoured by drawing attention to the diverse objects, organisms, forces, and materialities that ‘cross between porous bodies’ (Lorimer 2013:62). Secondly, because such ontological manoeuvrings have epistemological consequences, it is vital to rethink which forms of intelligence, truth, and expertise count. This rethinking leads to questions of embodiment and affect in the form of ‘relational and distributed forces’ (Lorimer 2013:62). Finally, this approach supposes distinct politics and ethics. Appreciating nonhuman agencies underlines humans’ material connections to the world and how these can be made to matter.

I rely here on Fox and Alldred’s (2017) model for materialist social enquiry, namely new materialist analysis. Incorporating the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987), Coole and Frost (2010), Braidotti (2013), and Clough (2004), the collaborators have developed, reassessed, and applied this method since 2015 (Fox and Alldred 2015a; 2015b; 2019; 2021). The tool is based on propositions such as focusing on matter; exploring what matter *does* through affect (not what it *is*); not privileging human agency; seeing thoughts, memories, desires, and emotions as having material effects; and highlighting the micropolitical aspects of material forces (Fox & Alldred 2017:23–27). A new materialist analysis begins by trawling the data to make sense of how various materialities have assembled. This places the analytical focus firmly upon materiality and its relationality—what it does rather than what it is. One then composes a ‘cloud’ of ‘intra-acting’ (Barad 1996:179) material relations which can be visually represented (in no particular order) (Fox & Alldred 2017:28):

materiality – materiality – materiality – materiality – materiality –
materiality – materiality – materiality – materiality – ...

This visual representation instantly reminds one of Massumi’s (1987:xi) description of Deleuzoguattarian ‘nomad thought’ that replaces the ‘closed equation of representation, $x = x = \text{not } y$ ($I = I = \text{not } you$)’ with an ‘open equation: ... + y + z + a + ... (+ arm + brick + window

+ ...)’. Through this ‘open equation’, a network of many materialities comes to the fore. Fox and Alldred’s (2017:29) model provides a way to determine ‘how assembled relations affect or are affected by each other’. Following them, a new materialist analysis that illustrates the relations between the actors present at the time of the interview with Nicholas might reveal something such as this:

Nicholas – red briefcase – mother – memory objects – childhood
– collection – classification – fascination with round-shaped
objects – preservation – memories – family connections – storage
– space – sense of perfection – meaning – shift – adulthood –
changed way of thinking about memory objects – experiences
– interview – researcher – storytelling – language

Here, various materialities, such as humans, objects, thoughts, memory narratives, words, and so on, are interacting. The following two sections discuss how I identified these materialities as part of this ‘cloud’ and how the interactions between them came about. I first home in on ‘affect’ as a critical component in foregrounding objects’ agency. I then move on to the notion of fluctuating value by drawing on Boscagli’s ‘stuff’ alongside Nicholas’s awareness of how his sentimentality is a ‘completely different experience now’ from when he was younger.

Affective flows

In line with new materialist thinking, I wanted to remain conscious of participants’ bodily reactions towards me as a researcher, the questions posed, and their memory objects. Participants’ relations with their memory objects evoked diverse emotions ranging from comfort, contentment, pride and joy to anxiety. Together, we engaged with memory objects presented by each participant. Some took an object from a box, bag, or larger pile of items and held it in their hands, feeling its texture or weight. Whereas some scooped the object up, others touched it briefly while telling its story.

In some cases, the participant’s eyes met mine; in others, their eyes remained fixed on the object. When an item was large or in another part of the room, some pointed to it while giving some background, while others got up and walked towards it. Sometimes I was invited to a different space—the garden, the kitchen, the bedroom—where we inspected objects together (Loots 2022:212).

Upon reaching the part of the interview, when I asked Nicholas which memory objects he kept, he mentioned that most of what he still treasured could be found in the briefcase in front of us. Nicholas's mother bought it in the 1980s, possibly from Edgars,³ and considered herself 'very grand: the only woman [in the Transnet offices] with a briefcase and, please note, a *red* one'. She used to go to work in 'a white or black shirt with a red skirt, red stockings, red shoes, a red necklace, red earrings, red nails, and red lips'. Nicholas remembered being fascinated by the briefcase's red colour since he was little. 'The enigma of the combination lock mechanisms naturally added to my preoccupation with the briefcase', he added. He could not recall the exact moment but explained that his mother probably gifted it to him around the end of primary school when she no longer used it for work. Resting his hand on its leather surface, he explained that this occasion—in my presence—was the first time in a long time that he was opening the briefcase:

So, for me it will be just as big a surprise to see what is inside. Um, I know of a few things that are in there I can now definitely recall being there, but I think there will be things in there of which I don't know what they are. And that's quite exciting. Because objects recall memories. Like when you touch them. There are triggers. Absolutely. Of course, there are also scents that accompany them, like how certain things still smell after all these years and you're not quite sure how.

It felt like minuscule jolts of energy were sparked in me by the unveiling of the objects (Figures 7.2 and 7.3) inside. Nicholas took out (almost) every object individually and explained where it came from and why he kept it. Or that he was not sure why he *still* kept it. His meticulous, almost obsessive classification of things round, stringy, things with words, things shiny, and things from the hospital was noteworthy. From the briefcase emerged orthopaedic plaster casts (he had surgery as a baby for his club feet), coins from different countries, a set of keys, and small pieces from a 'doedelsakkie'. ('Doedelsakkie' is a word his parents used for 'small bags with stuff in', which has the other meaning of a small set of bagpipes, while ringing with Afrikaans words related to 'doing', 'sleeping', and 'doodling'). Then emerged a golden scarab beetle ornament with a hidden clock underneath its moveable wings, tiny shiny objects (a green fish, a transparent triangle with a pink flower in it), a range of round objects



Figure 7.2. (above)
Stuff from the red briefcase, including plaster casts from an operation for club feet in Nicholas's childhood, a collection of round objects, a scarab beetle ornamental clock, and a sea urchin shell. 29 March 2019. Photograph by Olivia Loots.

Figure 7.3. (below)
Things round and/or shiny and/or transparent Nicholas collected during his childhood. 29 March 2019. Photograph by Olivia Loots.

³ Edgars is a well-known South African chain store that sells mass-market fashion items. During South Africa's 'retail revolution' from the 1960s to the 1980s, Edgars targeted predominantly white, middle-class customers (Dos Santos 2018).



Figure 7.4. The round-shaped plastic 'dingetje' Nicholas used to carry around as a child. 29 March 2019. Photograph by Olivia Loots.

(‘I had a thing with circles’), a marble turtle, porcupine quills, a sea urchin shell, letters from old boyfriends, a piece of his parents’ wedding cake (‘8 Mei 1982’ marked on the side), his first lock of hair, and photographs.

Pausing to hold a coin-sized, scratched and scuffed plastic mould cast with one red rose, one white rose, and a few green fern stems in the palm of his hand, Nicholas exclaimed, pausing before and after the word ‘object’: ‘*This* is my favourite ... object ... in the world. What it is, I don’t ... don’t know how to describe it to you ... This I’ve had since I was three, four, five years old’ (Figure 7.4). This was followed by a brief recollection of the potential origins of what he called his ‘dingetjie’⁴ [thingie]: perhaps a gift? Perhaps found in the street? Perhaps from his grandmother’s house? He chuckled: ‘I [used to] carry it around in my bag [...] every single day’. ‘It’s also gotten lost in the past’, he added, ‘and I was hysterical [to the point] that my parents had to turn the place upside down to find it, because ... it’s ... my “dingetjie” is gone.’ He looked down at the object: ‘I knew I still had it [...] It’s been thirty years that I’ve been dragging this along. [...] It makes me so ... it gives me unbelievable pleasure holding this in my hand now, still, after all these years.’ From his tone of voice, body language, and gaze at that particular moment, it was clear that Nicholas was physically, emotionally, psychologically and physiologically touched by the round object in his palm.

From this event, one may infer that the object has *affected* Nicholas. Affect,⁵ according to Claire Hemmings (2005:551), is a ‘state [...] of being’ that can be transferred onto various objects, people, emotions, and other affects. Seigworth and Gregg (2010:1) argue that affect arises amid *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon. For Massumi (1995:85), affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity, a ‘moment of unformed and unstructured potential’, which becomes emotion once recognised and owned.

Deleuze (1988:45), following Spinoza, locates affect and the capacity to be affected amid relations or assemblages composed of bodies, things, and ideas in the world. Affect becomes ‘persistent proof of a body’s never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world’s obstinacies and rhythms’ (Seigworth & Gregg 2010:1). As responsive humans, we can be moved by materialities: such affective bodily responses are easily aroused by factors beyond human control. This places humans, as can be seen in Nicholas’s case above, in networks of heterogeneous materialities with affective flows between them. Drawing on various perspectives, I understand affect to be ‘mediated

and transmitted through an automatic sensory flow of uncontained energies that move across thresholds’ (Loots 2022:51).

Considering affect as something that flows between materialities also evokes ways of thinking about the human body as one such materiality.⁶ Massumi (1995:85) maintains that affect is usually directly manifested at the surface of the body—on the skin—as something that can be scientifically studied, where we are ‘directly absorbing the outside’. O’Sullivan (2001:126) agrees that affects can be seen as ‘moments of intensity, [...] reaction[s] in/on the body’ which take place at the level of ‘matter’ and which are ‘immanent to experience’. For Nicholas, it is possible that the sensation of the object on his skin evoked strong childhood memories and accompanying responses: his human body becomes an object that can be moved to actualise specific capacities.⁷

Affect theory provides a way of understanding agency *not* tied to human action, which shifts the focus for social inquiry from ‘humans and their bodies’ to examining how relational networks of ‘animate and inanimate [objects] affect and are affected’ (DeLanda 2006:4). Similarly, Sedgwick (2003:17) holds that affect can be a way of deepening one’s vision of the studied terrain and of allowing for and prioritising its ‘texture’. Hemmings (2005:548) shares this view but warns that although the return to ontological demands of objects is useful, theorists should remain wary of the possible effects of positioning affect as *the* sole answer to philosophical questions concerning the relations between materialities.

While there is no certainty surrounding how and when affect moves between materialities, these affective nuances are interesting when studying human/object relations. For example, affective flows between Nicholas and the memory objects in the red briefcase diverge: some objects have a stronger pull, others less so. In moments of ‘unstructured potential’, noting affect is crucial in determining the relative relations between bodies, objects, and environments and what their future arrangements might be (Massumi 1995:85). Knowing what affect is and what it does to materialities in constant interaction, sets the scene for a discussion on the mutating value of such materialities, prominently illustrated through the term ‘stuff’, as set out below.

Stuff’s fluctuating value

With each interview, I noticed that participants interpreted the notion of ‘value’ in variegated ways. Value judgment about memory objects

⁴ ‘Dingetjie’ is an Afrikaans word that loosely translates to ‘thingy’. Anything small and unidentified can be a ‘dingetjie’. It can also be a term of endearment or rejection, depending on context and tonality. ⁵ For a historical overview of affect theory, see *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010). ⁶ Jennifer Lauwrens’s (2014) doctoral thesis traces the role of affect (alongside anti-ocularcentric and multisensory approaches) in relation to artworks. ⁷ Different spatiotemporal contexts, including micropolitics of the self and macropolitical social relations of power, are involved and cannot be overlooked when studying affect (see, for example, Ahmed 2004 Hemmings 2005).

became specifically apparent when discussing change: participants usually critically engaged with their memory objects during transitional life phases, such as cleaning up their (or a family member's) home, losing a loved one, losing weight, changing jobs, or having children. The sentimental, functional, or economic value that participants attached to some objects later in their lives faded almost completely, while other objects became more valuable (Loots 2022:302–3). In short, the affective flows between materialities shift over time in unpredictable ways (Fox & Alldred 2019:29). Depending on where objects are incorporated and reincorporated into new systems of exchange and use, they are constantly commodified—by human users—as useless or valuable.

During our interview, Nicholas spent a significant amount of time reflecting on how his relationship with objects changed:

I think as a child I was extremely sentimental. I was kind of a hoarder. I hoarded stuff, I stored it away, archived it, made lists of things and had collections of stuff. I got hysterical when I couldn't complete a collection of something. In the sense of, perhaps, a sense of perfection. [...] It started, I think ... there were these sticker books from Walt Disney. [...] Then marbles came out. [...] I collected, um, pencils ... different ... as many different pencils as I could, grouped them by colour. I tried collecting stamps at some stage. I still have sets of postcards I collected ... There are, hm ... I collected coins, especially foreign ones.

The process of collecting objects concerns 'what, from the material world, specific groups and individuals choose to preserve, value, and exchange' (Clifford 1985:240). These collections of objects have 'interacted with the world and its subjects, and have a story to tell' (Boscagli 2014: 14). In this process, care—often to the degree of obsession—is taken to preserve such precious objects. While some objects are exhibited in public spaces such as The Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History, others remain in private collections and will likely never have the same degree of allure for a public audience. As seen here, this does not detract from the care, and meticulous curation often associated with collections, be they private or public.

At the time of the interview, Nicholas described himself as being at ease with 'carry[ing]' fewer objects with him (which in itself was an insightful, intentional or not, choice of words seeing he quite literally moves things

around in a briefcase). Nicholas described his sentimentality as an 'energy that changed shape': his sentiment was 'displaced from objects as the sentimental thing [...] to the experience as the sentimental thing'. He was no longer 'so sentimental', he said, 'about [these] objects that I need to touch them or use my senses to engage with them in order to have that sentimental feeling', although he still thoroughly enjoyed it.

Crucial in this regard is that, after unpacking the red briefcase's content, Nicholas stated that he would discard some objects once I had left. Examples included a brochure from a visit to the South African Mint,⁸ a palm-sized black disk from Sun City with wording in gold, 'Africa's kingdom of pleasure', and a key chain with the words 'Elke dag is 'n geskenk van God' [every day is a gift from God]. He explained that upon seeing these objects again, they no longer had 'meaning' for him. As becomes clear, one can see such objects not as designated 'for one type of matter, forever fixed, but [as] a category into which various objects can enter, and exit, in different historical circumstances' (Boscagli 2014:14). Similarly, Sherry Turkle (2007:6) notes how neither 'life nor the relationships with objects that accompany its journey' are lived in discrete stages: objects have 'roles that are multiple and fluid'.

Like all the other participants, Nicholas made value distinctions about memory objects (between objects with or without sentimental value, sentimental objects with or without monetary value, objects that are recyclable, donatable, upcyclable, and so on) (Loots 2022:264). Many objects that previously carried much sentimental value were later meaningless, while others became more valuable with time. Such malleability and transformation in value are 'evidence that objects are not locked into categories' but liminal, always bordering on gaining or losing value (Hawkins 2006:78). To illustrate this point further, I refer to Boscagli's use of the term 'stuff', as set out in her book *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (2014).

Informed by new materialist thinking, stuff theory explores everyday objects' radical potential and instability in a culture of consumption and spectacle. Boscagli (2014) unpacks humans' entanglement with unstable and affective objects by referring to such objects as 'stuff'. She proposes looking at stuff as a test case for the new materialist designation of matter as 'active, rhizomatic and emergent' by emphasising flux (Boscagli 2014:14). In her book, 'stuff' was illustrated through five intermittent flashes of 'minor' materiality in twentieth century modernity: through memory objects, fashion wear, clutter, home décor and waste. These fluctuating 'flashes

⁸ The building that used to house the South African Mint – of which Nicholas discarded the brochure – has more recently become The Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History where the *Inherited Obsessions* (2022) exhibition is held.

contain groups of objects' that share a liminality, a plasticity, transformative powers, and a capacity to generate events and 'promis[es] new versions of subject-object entanglements' (Boscagli 2014:3).

Throughout an exploration of each materiality, 'stuff' is not contained by epistemological fields or 'taxonomies of knowledge': it is 'always on the verge of becoming valueless while never ceasing to be commodified, awash with meaning but always ready to become junk or to mutate into something else' (Boscagli 2014:2–3). In this process, material stuff and humans interact in unpredictable, intimate, and intensely somatic ways. Through its unceasing traffic with the human, volatile stuff challenges an engrained Western history of object categorisation. This undoing of the philosophical and semiotic order of things provides novel ways of thinking about the complexity of humans' daily interaction with material objects, which informs the new materialism's call for a focus on human/nonhuman relations (Barad 2007).

In Nicholas's case, it was insightful that his relationship with memory objects—that can be read as stuff—shifted throughout his life. Although contained in a briefcase, the stuff was 'unstable, recyclable, made of elements put in place by different networks of power and meaning' (Boscagli 2014:5). The red briefcase itself could also be regarded as an object that has undergone shifts in the way it is valued: from being used as a carrier for important documents to and from the workplace by Nicholas's mother a few decades ago, it has since become laden with sentimental value, and storage space for memory objects. Although material objects are rooted in a certain historical production and specificity, they may have varied uses at later stages in their social lives, recontextualising them (Hallam & Hockney 2001:7). As Hawkins (2006:77) holds, it is difficult to sustain 'essentialist claims about the identity and fixed life cycle of things' since objects are constantly, through material practices, reincorporated into new systems of exchange and use.

Within the context of this study, then, objects are constantly moving into and out of categories. Once-sentimental objects might just as well become recyclable (or unrecyclable) stuff, or unsentimental objects might gain value over time. Some, such as the 'dingetje'—objects in the world, may never lose their sentimental touch but will most definitely not be carried on the adult body from day to day as in childhood. How materiality is apprehended is, therefore, a key aspect of valuing transformation. In summary, Nicholas's relationship with the objects in the red briefcase changed over time as they could no longer be neatly categorised as simply 'sentimental'. Because as matter is experienced and

'knotted through different encounters', it becomes clear that an object's perceived value impacts its affective hold, and vice versa (Boscagli 2014:12). Acknowledging hybrid materialities as uncategorisable and volatile reveals something of humans' entanglement with them.

Conclusion

Contemporary society teaches what it means to be human in the twenty-first century, and its modes of vision frame our perspectives on the interplay between human and nonhuman actants (Ayers 2012:45). The diligence with which some objects in both public and private spaces are preserved speak of such objects' affective demand for human responsibility and respect. The current chapter and the study from which it originated form part of a growing body of research projects that aim to expand methods to analyse the affective dimensions of experiences. In this chapter, I first discussed the new materialisms' dedication to undoing longstanding dichotomies. A useful new materialist point of departure is based on three entwined threads: interrogating modernist divisions; attending to questions of embodiment and affect; and examining emerging ethics that arise by exploring how human/nonhuman connections matter (Lorimer 2013:62–63).

Making use of an interview that demonstrates affect between objects as prominent, I was able to elaborate on the new materialisms' potentials: the unpacking of the interview with Nicholas showed how he, as a human, was intimately and somatically connected with the material objects that surrounded him. These relations were then discussed through an engagement with 'affect', a notion central to new materialist vocabulary. Analysing material and affective flows—that enliven some capacities and suppress others—reveals that objects, memories, and spaces constantly mediate human/nonhuman relations. Only when humans acknowledge the capacity to be affected by objects' fluctuating value can more just material relations emerge.

I finally turned to Boscagli's (2014) 'stuff theory', which helps think about the transforming and transformative potential of memory objects shifting in and out of categories throughout their lifespan. In a world inundated with emerging object formations, I suspect that an increasing number of things—or unruly stuff—that stretch far beyond the boundaries of objects with sentimental value would not fit easily into collections or categories. Unpredictable flows disrupt our efforts and teach us new ways of living with stuff, no matter how much and how often we collect, categorise, and attempt to delay decay.

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