

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 38
Issue 2 *Self and Stuff: Accumulation in
Francophone Literature and Art*

Article 2

2014

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Recommended Citation

Edwards, Natalie and Hubbell, Amy L. (2014) "Self and Stuff: Accumulation in Francophone Literature and Art," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 38: Iss. 2, Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1813>

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Self and Stuff: Accumulation in Francophone Literature and Art

Abstract

Introduction.

Keywords

accumulation, Francophone literature, autobiography, fiction, trauma, community

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We live in an era increasingly obsessed with both material things and personal identity. As capitalism and consumer culture advance unrestricted, and as reality television about wealthy socialites and impoverished hoarders grows in popularity, literature is also taking a turn. In recent years, autobiography, fiction, drama, and visual arts have moved progressively towards objects as a means of representing the self and one's relationship to others. Just like the library, archive, or museum, authors collect, accumulate, and even hoard fragments imbued with meaning as a way of articulating who they really are. The articles gathered for this study all turn their attention to the impacts of overabundant material items on the representation of the self. As Daniel Miller explores in *The Comfort of Things* (2008), "We live today in a world of ever more stuff—what sometimes seems a deluge of goods and shopping. We tend to assume that this has two results: that we are more superficial, and that we are more materialistic, our relationships to things coming at the expense of our relationship;" however, Miller uncovers "that possessions often remain profound and usually the closer our relationships are with objects, the closer our relationships are with people" (13-14).

Although stuff often reminds us of important people, places, and times in our lives, sometimes it becomes unbearable to let go of those symbolic relics. What happens when the accumulated, composite materials become heavily condensed? When the collection crosses over to the hoard, what is kept is also obstructed. Each thing becomes enmeshed in an intricate web. Items are buried in the rubble and the jumbled mess emerges as a fortress around the one depicting it. Eventually, the preserved thing is destroyed through the sheer volume of debris, and instead of stuff serving to link the individual to a broader community, it isolates the one who accumulates. When hoarding what one wants to cherish, the attached memories become lost behind the physical souvenirs. Much like in a hoarded house where one must carefully navigate goat paths through piled belongings to access various rooms, when an author or artist can no longer sort through memorial debris, does her story become one of hiding the self rather than representing it?

The articles in this volume explore how various types of accumulation function in relationship to formative moments and the development of identity. The type of accumulation studied in each article differs in nature, and while some of the texts studied present controlled and defined collections, others teeter towards excessiveness. Obsessive accumulation, or hoarding, has been psychologically linked to "traumatic experiences, or chaotic or disruptive

living situations, earlier in life” according to the foremost researchers in hoarding, Randy Frost and Gail Steketee (“A Q&A”). Because of the traumas they’ve endured, many compulsive hoarders are unable to organize their memory in an inhabitable manner. Amy Hubbell has posited that they are unable “to sort out or focus on what matters most (objects, events, people), and the mass of superfluous detail that they carry as memorial baggage hinders their ability to recount the past” (“Collecting Souvenirs”). For writers who represent accumulation, each of the hoarded objects is often tied to that memorial baggage that cannot be sorted out or discarded. According to Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson, “memory, apparently so immaterial, personal, and elusive, is always implicated in materiality, whether it be the materiality of sound, stone, text, garment... or the materiality of our very bodies.... Memory is evoked by the senses—and encoded in objects or events with particular meaning for the narrator” (27). Likewise, Susan M. Pearce points out that a life-history can be mapped out “by selecting and arranging personal memorial material” which might also be called “object autobiography” (32). For those who have suffered trauma, however, the selecting and arranging can become burdensome. It is when the selection process can no longer be undertaken that memory hoarding occurs, and this link is explored across a number of articles in this volume.

Rather than classifying the artists and authors studied in this volume as hoarders, we wish to show their representations of accumulation as linked to loss—either a result of extreme change or sometimes the catalyst for it. What the authors, artists, and fictional characters have lost varies: a lost lover, a lost country, a lost limb. But each uses stuff to both relink herself to a point of separation and to attempt to move beyond that separation. Objects stand in for memories, serving as physical reminders of what one had or might have had. When carried to the extreme, these accumulations take on a life of their own. In the texts studied in this volume, these hoards are put on display, sometimes to a therapeutic end, and in other cases further isolating the sufferer. We hope to show through these diverse studies that identity is intricately linked to stuff in both delicate and crude ways.

The contributors to this volume take a broad approach to the theme of accumulation and the articles thus examine examples of collecting, exhibiting, hoarding, and proliferating in novels, autobiographical works, diaries, and art exhibitions. Taken together, the articles converge at the interplay between the accumulation of objects and the narration of individual and collective identity. The authors explore such narratives of identity emanating from different cultures, including Quebec, Morocco, Senegal, Algeria, and France, and thus tease out an array of parallels and dissimilarities.

A point of commonality throughout the volume is the layering of identity achieved through the representation of inanimate objects. Writing or exhibiting “stuff” contributes to the creation of individual, as well as national, regional, local, family, and gendered identities. Katarzyna Pieprzak, for example, shows in her comparison of a literary work and a museum that

objects signifying the everyday lives of individuals can be transformed into remnants of past national identity or into a revindication of regional and local specificity. Julie Robert studies the relationship between objects and individuals in historically significant periods, showing how objects can expose class and gendered identities at the same time as they solidify national and regional identity. Natalie Edwards examines how an art exhibition creates a narrative of collective, gendered identity that transcends national boundaries at the same time that it partially obscures an individual self-narrative. In all of the articles assembled here, “stuff” is the link between the various layers of identity constructed in narrative and reveals relationships between self and other, between self and nation, and between narrated and narrating self.

Many of the articles therefore highlight how authors and artists employ objects in the search for a sense of origin on national, collective, and individual levels. On the individual level, authors of autobiographical texts studied in this volume appear to curate their own life through an accumulated mass of objects. As Adrienne Angelo points out in her essay, “objects and the memories evoked by them indeed serve a primary writing imperative, reinforcing the author’s place in time and space and also the author’s relationship to self and others.” Angelo traces references to a number of objects that recur throughout Marie Nimier’s oeuvre, highlighting how they hold significance in the writer’s quest to understand the father she lost at a young age and her ensuing identity struggle. Amy Hubbell compares representations of the French exodus from Algeria, showing how authors proliferate images and objects to depict the individual trauma they experienced during childhood and to link their suffering to that of a community. Pieprzak analyzes how objects form an integral part of a fictional woman’s sense of past identity and how they constitute crucial aspects of a real community’s past and future in the construction of a new museum. Robert demonstrates how objects, and material culture on the whole, serve to join women together while contradictorily tearing apart the community. In his study of Fatou Diome’s *Celles qui attendent* ‘The Women Who Wait’, Christopher Hogarth also explores how the quest for capital results in the treatment of individuals like objects and pulls apart the community’s foundation.

The preservation of objects through museums and archives is a recurrent theme, as authors interrogate the ways in which individuals and communities accumulate, display, and guard what is deemed to be valuable. The practices of such preservation are called into question, as well as the sites of preservation themselves. As Edwards puts it in her analysis of Jacques Derrida’s *Mal d’archive*, “the archive is based upon both ordering of information and removal of it from general circulation.” Each time an object is chosen to represent or preserve the past, the object also loses both accessibility and use value. Edwards shows how French performance artist Sophie Calle exposes established practices of archiving not just as incomplete and subjective, but also as patriarchal and discriminatory. Similarly, Pieprzak’s

study of a new museum that takes an innovative approach to collecting, evaluating, and displaying artifacts shows a different valorization of “stuff” in communities in transition.

The figures of the museum and the archive point to a key connection between all of the works studied here: the blending of textual and visual materials in the quest for self-narrative. Many of the texts examined incorporate both words and images as authors and artists look to a variety of artistic modes to articulate individual, collective, and national identity. We explored this phenomenon in *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film and Comic Art in French Autobiography*, analyzing the relationship between identity and photography, *bande dessinée*, and film in contemporary French autobiography. In the present volume, we broaden the scope of this enquiry to take material culture into consideration, asking how objects and self-narrative come together at a time of increasing reliance on visual media. Anna Rocca studies an example of ekphrasis, arguing that the verbal descriptions of images that Nina Bouraoui incorporates into her work nuance our understanding of this author’s autobiographical project and further her articulation of memory and intimacy. Hubbell shows how the layering of textual and visual materials in diaries and artwork allow for an innovative expression of trauma. Pieprzak and Edwards both interrogate the juxtaposition of text and image in public display, asking how words and objects in archives and museums coalesce to produce new understandings of identity.

The volume thus asks questions such as: how do things represent both communities and individuals, and how do those same things either bind the community together or pull them apart? Many of the accumulated items represent modernity, whether the items are invested with imaginary value or with real use. On the other hand, some collected objects also represent debris from the past. In both cases, objects taken out of daily circulation become devoid of use, but this removal simultaneously leads to a new artistic and interpretive value. Ultimately, we seek to understand what objects are selected to represent the self, how or why that selection occurs, and how accumulated stuff covers over painful absences.

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