

WRITING BACK TO WILLIE: COLLECTING CURIOSITY

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Extended Abstract

This paper considers the role of collected objects within the parameters of a larger PhD study.

Observations from theoretical and personal perspectives will inform and form the 'bric a brac' of this paper, accumulating within a conceptual 'cabinet of curiosities'. In order to expose some of the complexities and ambiguities that both allow and disallow a fuller understanding of the role that objects have in reflecting and representing culture, this collection of words, concepts and artifacts developed for my own 'cabinet of curiosities', will contrast and compare aspects of theoretical commentary situating material objects within cultural contexts of the past and present.

Inspired by a collection of hand written letters, this study reflects my developing interest in the role of material culture, 'object/s' and object collections in late 19th century and contemporary culture. The letters were penned by a late nineteenth-century Queensland grazier, my great uncle, Will Henry (1896-1906), while he lived and worked on Queensland cattle properties. Will died of typhoid in 1907 at the age of 30.



William Henry,
circa 1905
Photo: Cardwell Shire
Photographic
Collection

The letters provide one person's perspective on cultural life in a particular period of time in Queensland. I have followed Will to places that he mentions in his letters, and those journeys have involved the gathering of material and information that respond to his words and my own research and experiences. As I broaden the scope of the research material beyond the letters, a richer more exciting understanding of their context is developing. My skills as an artist, author, researcher and collector combine to create the words, images and object collections that will imagine a reply to Willie and offer new understandings and experiences in the here and now.

This inter-disciplinary study draws on postcolonial, ethnographic, narratological, cultural and visual theory to support and provide context for my research. Some investigation of colonial practices and constructs in respect of material culture will offer a framework to contextualise environments formulated by aspects of culture in which Will lived and I live.

As an enquiry that "reflect(s) the complication(s) and ambiguities" (Bickerton 2001, p. 24) of the past discernible in the present, archival and field research is fundamental to a process that reflects on shifting values that affect interpretation and the development of meaning. The potential for

"impure" (Bal 2001, p. 266) discourse is prompted by continually shifting readings/narratives of the past and present and compounded by intention, cognition and learning.

Narrative as "a mode of reasoning and a mode of representation" (Richardson 1995, p. 200) forms a fundamental component of a sociological (ethnographic) exploration of Will's narratives. My narratives respond to his words and are reflected in my words, collected objects and artworks.

An overarching concept, a 'cabinet of curiosities', is intended to act as a broad structure and point of focus. The 'bric a brac' will include theoretical analysis, studio practice, Will's letters, other narratives and collected objects, and the recording and interpretation of experience, travel, process and systems. I have generally restricted resources for this study to the time periods represented by Will's letters between 1895 and 1906, and contemporary western writing and visual arts practices (including my own) between 1995 and 2006. This provides two distinctive periods one hundred years apart.

As a part of this study, I am developing a collection of objects to reflect my own explorations and respond to Will's journeys. This will eventually be displayed in an exhibition context. Insofar as my own 'cabinet' is concerned some similarities with 19th century cabinets may become apparent although the physical boundary of my own will be represented by an exhibition space. The space will act as a container not only for the objects I collect and create but a gathering point for the focused thought and concentration central to my research. My objects have taken on narratives that illustrate their connection and meaning to me. As a collective, they are also an expression of an aesthetic that is uniquely mine (not suggesting at any time that they cannot be appreciated by others). While educators in the past did stress an "objectification of experience and the denial of subjectivity" (Hooper-Greenhill 2001, p. 106), I would suggest that the subjective qualities of my own collection are not so dissimilar to the qualities of curiosity cabinets that Bann (2003) describes from the late 19th century (pp. 123-4).

As with a 19th century privately owned 'cabinet of curiosities' or private museum any exhibition I develop becomes an authored installation with some expectation of "create(ing) visual meaning" (Higonnet 2003, p. 145). As opposed to a public museum collection selected according to institutional guidelines expressing, in Anne Higonnet's words, "cultural values" (p. 134), the objects in my collection are first and foremost gathered for my own pleasure and contemplation – a process which has been both visceral and highly flexible, reflecting my "individual impulses" (p. 134). A similar process that I assume Will would have undertaken when he collected his thoughts in letters intended for the eyes of his brother - thoughts not meant for public consumption.

While the items that I collect were randomly selected in the initial stages of this project, I did give some thought to how they might communicate with Will's words, reflect cultural meaning, gender orientation, display potential, and connection to the project. The objects were originally manufactured items in common usage but now represent patterns of existence notwithstanding the cyclical nature of life, reflecting a perspective of domestic life that while familiar is fading.

From the moment these objects come into my 'possession' they have a voice, and that voice gathers more strength as time progresses and the narrative that attach to each of them, develops and mutates. For me, the visual exhibition or framing of these items will further alter context and

meaning as, like artist Lauren Berkowitz, my "preoccupation with amassing testimonies and memories that reflect the (auto)biographical" (King 2001, p. 51) allow new meanings within this study. Drawing on Nick Zangwill's complex theories (1999, pp. 315 - 30) that examine art and audiences, I expect that any experience these objects might offer an audience will depend on my intention (inextricably linked to my role in monitoring the creative process) and an audience's disposition and aesthetic. I cannot anticipate an audience's reaction although initial surveys have suggested that concepts of nostalgia and value are qualities inherent within a number of collected objects.

Now that the collection has become more substantial and I am able to look back at the processes of collecting, it is obvious that this has also become a cultural mapping exercise, or a cartography of collecting as described by Rebecca Duclos (1999, pp. 58-61). Her comments on the close links between objects, collections, maps and travel resonate with my own project as I travel through Queensland visiting places that Will referred to and other points along the way.

My own practice of collecting has exposed another line of enquiry. I have become interested in how museum concepts are translated in a domestic situation through private collections and what those collections represent in the eyes of their owners. Initial surveys I have undertaken reveal that a collector's impulse varies widely. While the responses by individual collectors to specific objects from their own collections show some similarities they are really quite diverse. My own observations and surveys suggest that the more memorable the collecting experience the greater is the value of the object in the mind of the collector.

While there is no specific intention within my study to specifically define the characteristics of the objects I have uncovered a range of concepts that do shape context, illustrating ambiguities and diversities that allow and disallow meaning and understanding. While this investigation offers particular perspectives at this time, I would expect any further readings will continue to alter and/or extend abstractions and meaning that deepen and enrich my study.

Keywords:

Material culture, history, Queensland

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