



Australasian  
Association  
of Writing  
Programs

# TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

*Macquarie University*

**Merril Howie**

***Materiality, Cognition, Agency and Vitality: Inter-relational Exchanges with Non-Human Forms in Vicki Hastrich's Night fishing***

Abstract:

This discussion of Hastrich's 2019 memoir, *Night fishing*, examines the author's inter-relational exchanges with materiality and natural, non-human forms. In considering her textured cognitive engagements with frames, including man-made material artifacts such as the television camera and visual art, as well as literary framing devices, my analyses underscore the frequently overlooked, yet integral dimension of materiality in the writing process. Drawing on Karenleigh A. Overmann's and Thomas Wynn's interdisciplinary investigation into materiality and cognition (focusing specifically on the interplay of stone tools, writing and materiality), I use these scholars' explication of our evolutionary progression from "*thinking through* materiality", to "*thinking about* it" (2019, p. 458) to illuminate Hastrich's intriguing insights into the nature of her material engagements. By foregrounding her competing psychological approaches, I show how Hastrich's life writing highlights both the challenges and rewards of pushing *against* this evolutionary progression—in terms of both the mental processes involved and their narrative explication. Informed by Jane Bennett's philosophical perspectives on the distributive qualities of agency between human and non-human entities, the article also examines how this memoir draws out the agentic and vibrant dimensions of materiality and natural forms, including the ocean and its tidal forces. I suggest that Hastrich's calibrated autobiographical investigation into the psychological minutia of her material engagements, and her marked ability to elevate the visibility of agency in non-human forms, can increase our understanding of, and sensitivity to, the competing modes of thought that can impact our material engagements, and the varying degrees of agency and energy that are intrinsic components of our inter-relational exchanges with both man-made material artifacts and non-human forms.

Biographical note:

Merril Howie is an Honorary Postdoctoral Fellow and Sessional Academic in the School of Humanities at Macquarie University. Drawing the sciences into dialogue with literary studies, her interdisciplinary analyses of autobiographical texts focus particularly on the narrative representation and potential cognitive impact of memory

and emotion. Her work has been published in *Antipodes*, *Life Writing*, and *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*. She is currently working on a monograph that examines the textual and readerly autobiographical exchange of memory and emotion in literary memoirs.

Keywords:

Materiality, cognition, agency, non-human forms, Hastrich

## Introduction

Broadening the traditional anthropocentric focus on human-to-human relationships and interpersonal dynamics, contemporary life writing texts—responding to “the pressure posthumanism exerts on virtually every aspect of auto/biographical narrative”, particularly notions of the centrality and autonomy of the human (Hengel, 2023, p.420)—commonly foreground experiential involvements with non-human objects, entities and natural phenomena. Particularly in the sub-genres of memoir and the personal essay, recent autobiographical writing positions the interpersonal dynamics among the authorial ‘I’ and other people as *one*, rather than *the* central area of intersubjective focus. Life writers such as Lauren Fuge, for example, explore broader existential questions of human impact and planetary survival. The sobering starting point for Fuge’s recent memoir *Voyagers* (2024), is the pressing problem of “imminent ecological collapse” (2024, p. 9). Analogous with the historic human disposition for journeying, Fuge’s personal global forays consider the influential forces of culture, environment, economics and genetics that have both led us to the present ecological moment, and that may, via our collective ability for “curiosity and discovery” (2024, p.10), help us to propel ourselves into a sustainable future. Repositioning this inter-relational autobiographical lens on non-human forms to concentrate on more specific, or niche areas of contemporary interest, Clare Brant has identified a substantial sub-genre of life writing that she refers to as “underwater memoirs” (2009, p. 114). Mindful of the fact that underwater immersion significantly impacts the mind, body and senses, many such memoirists describe “the effects of underwater on perception, self-definition, and communication” (Brant, 2009, p. 114).

Australian writer, Vicki Hastrich similarly focuses much of her experiential lens on human-to-non-human engagements in her eclectic and captivating collection of autobiographical essays, *Night fishing* (2019). Throughout this memoir, Hastrich’s inter-relational focus on her engagements with the materiality of man-made artifacts and with non-human entities ranges from the plant and sea life of NSW’s coastal estuaries to the professional intricacies of television camera operation, the multidimensionality of baroque artworks, the recording of tidal flows in Sydney Harbour and the quintessentially Australian suburban activity of lawn mowing. By delving into the intersubjective dimensions of her involvements with materiality and non-human forms, Hastrich’s “questing mind and eye” (Johinke (2019) move beyond a mere contemplation of such beyond-the-human interchanges. Rather, in striving to achieve positive, productive material engagements with various iterations of framing devices, she delineates the psychological processes and evaluates the merits of different inter-relational approaches. She also highlights the often overlooked components of agency and vitality that can emanate from non-human entities, such as the ocean and its tidal forces.

Although some have questioned whether this essay collection qualifies as a memoir [1], Hastrich’s consistent focus on her thoughts and feelings reveals much about her personal preferences, character traits, and philosophical leanings. We learn, early on, that she is a straight talker—evident in the blunt self-assessment: “In my life I haven’t been all that good at being around people”—who eschews uninvited social overtures and relishes any opportunity “to go off looking on . . . [her] own” (2019, p. 18; 38). Over and above Hastrich’s deep love of

fishing and the abundant natural wonders of Brisbane Waters, her authorial persona reveals an enquiring and patient student of nature, always on the lookout for revelatory moments—“the surprise of the marvellous glimpsed” (2019, p. 19). For Hastrich, the focus of such quicksilver sightings often centres on natural elements and material forms—rather than the human, interpersonal dynamics—of the world around her.

Hastrich’s narration, as is fitting “in a genre that invites and indeed demands critical reflection and introspection” (Johinke, 2019), consistently invites us into her psyche. In revealing her interior landscapes, we learn how she brings meaning to personal experience as she interprets her intersubjective exchanges with non-human forms. Foregrounding this inward sensibility from the outset, Hastrich’s first essay “The Hole”—her revered 37-metre-deep fishing spot—conveys the importance she places on fishing in solitude: “[t]he mere presence of even the quietest of strangers would keep me from the uninhibited level of concentration I needed if I was to get the fullest experience. The other sort of experience—just the doing, not the being—was, I thought, not worth having” (2019, p. 10). This pattern of autobiographical representation, whereby Hastrich’s experiential descriptions are interpreted and explicated via detailed explorations of the hidden mental vistas of her psyche, or ‘being’, characterise this essay collection. The “thought-provoking observations” resulting from these interior reflections, as Trevor Moore (2020) notes, “make you put the book down and ponder the implications of what you’ve just read”.

The third, extended essay “My Life and the Frame” is divided into nine parts, effectively interweaving Hastrich’s recollections of her inter-relational engagements with the viewfinder when working as a television camera operator, and her unsuccessful attempt to write “an Australian colonial baroque novel” (p. 39). The materiality of the ‘frame’, in varying contexts, is the discursive anchor for these seemingly disparate subjects. Expanding on her penchant for “putting a frame around things” (p. 33), Hastrich explores the resonances among the “humble window” that captured the treasured views of her childhood, “the beautiful blank zone” (p. 37) of the television camera’s view-finder, and the “kinetic desire” and “interactivity” of baroque artworks that can “burs[t] out of the frame to claim attention” (p. 41). The interpretive matrix through which Hastrich finds meaning in her interactions with the material dimensions of these framing devices can, I suggest, be distilled into two competing cognitive orientations: thinking *through* materiality and thinking *about* materiality.

In their detailed anthropological examination of human brain function and material interaction, cognitive archeological theorists Karenleigh A. Overmann and Thomas Wynn stress the profound impact of materiality on our cognition, which “far exceeds its acknowledged role in offloading and storing mental content” (2019, p. 457). Reappraising earlier perceptions of human cognition as confined solely to “*activity in the brain*” contemporary understandings recognise the “*extended*” nature of our mental processing, whereby brain, body and materiality operate in conjunction with one another, together with the “enacted” nature of the mind’s operations, wherein “interactivity among brain, body, and world creat[e] meaning and experience” (Overmann, 2017, p. 355, p.354). Of particular relevance to this discussion of Hastrich’s autobiographical approach—especially regarding our evolutionary progression

from “*thinking through* materiality” to “*thinking about* it”—is the fact that thousands of years of interacting with material culture has *changed* the way the human brain functions (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 458). A sharper awareness of these developmental cognitive capacities is especially helpful in illuminating the degree of difficulty associated with Hastrich’s repeated attempts to achieve the *former* mode of engagement—*thinking through* the material. Such a mental approach is congruent with Hastrich’s repeated references to “unthinking”, the mode of thought she strives for when wishing to access the “deep level of concentration” required during her inter-relational material engagements with the televisual viewfinder (2019, p. 33).

As Overmann and Wynn point out, the human species has now evolved to the extent that we “are consciously aware of very little of our cognitive activity as we move our bodies and interact with material forms” (2019, p. 463) [2]. And conversely, even though elements of materiality are part and parcel of our daily thought processes, “its [materiality’s] central role in human cognition is often unappreciated” (Overmann, 2017, p. 354). A clear case in point is the embedded component of materiality in our writing processes. Although our highly developed systems of literacy may appear to be predominantly constitutive of cognitive components, Overmann and Wynn unequivocally refer to “the material form that is writing” (2019, p. 460). Addressing this under-appreciated aspect of materiality’s crucial role in writing, these scholars observe that “[r]eading and writing are often considered as a mode of language rather than an interaction between brains, bodies, and a material technology” (2019, p. 460). In teasing out this interplay among mind, body and technology, they highlight the “critical” aspect of materiality, “given the inseparability of looking at written material to understand its meaning and the written form itself” (2019, 460). Tracing the profound evolutionary impact of both stone tools and writing, Overmann and Wynn observe that human “interaction” with these “material forms” . . . endowed our lineage with conceptual thought and meta-awareness of conceptual domains” (2019, p. 457). In a separate discussion of the long history of human literacy, Overmann notes that approximately 2,000 years BC, “the cursive script” developed by “Mesopotamian writers” allowed writing to “exten[d] . . . to all sorts of new discursive applications (Veldhuis, 2014), demonstrating an ability to grapple with the ideas writing expressed, rather than the mechanics of its production” (2017, p. 361). Leaving to one side literacy’s facilitation of analytical thought, and the effective communication of those analytical ideas “across space and time” (2017, p. 361), Overmann underscores writing’s crucial material component, both in terms of its evolutionary development and its contemporary significance:

Through generations of tinkering and adjustment, the material form becomes increasingly capable of eliciting particular behavioral and psychological responses. Today the material component of literacy embodies and makes available the changes incrementally accumulated by past brains, bodies, and materiality; acts as a medium for recreating those changes in present individuals; and, through mechanisms like malleability and contrasts of form and structure, affords possibilities for realizing future change (2017, 361).

In analysing Hastrich’s experiential involvements with non-human forms, Overmann’s and Wynn’s scholarship helps me to tease out the nature of Hastrich’s inter-relational engagements with the materiality of the frame, in varying contexts. We not only explore how specific

experiential portrayals reflect this evolutionary cognitive development, but also, in delving more deeply into the intriguing internal panorama of Hastrich’s competing psychological approaches to the material, we discover how her life writing highlights the challenges and rewards of pushing *against* this evolutionary progression, in terms of both the mental processes involved and their narrative explication. In this paper’s latter stages, I consider how Hastrich’s autobiographical engagements with the embedded materiality of the camera frame, baroque art, and words, together with the non-human forms of the ocean and its tidal forces collectively highlight specific components of agency and vitality that emanate from these artifacts and non-human entities. In examining how Hastrich draws out the agentic and vibrant dimensions of non-human matter, I draw on the vital materialist views of philosopher Jane Bennett. Widely known for her conceptualisation of “thing power”, Bennett mobilises this notion to demonstrate how non-human entities (including “human artifacts” or “man-made items”), play an active role in human culture (2010, p.2; xvi). In probing how Hastrich effectively underscores the agency and vibrancy of non-human entities, however, I focus more specifically on Bennett’s theorisation of the shared vitality and “distributive” qualities of agency among the human, the “not-quite-human”, and non-human, which Bennett positions along a continuum of “collaboration, cooperation or interactive interference of many bodies and forces” (2010, p. ix; 21). I suggest that Hastrich’s calibrated autobiographical investigation into the fascinating cognitive minutia of human/material exchanges, which also elevates the visibility of otherwise opaque agentic and vital dimensions of non-human forms, can assist us—to borrow Bennett’s eloquent phraseology—to become more cognisant of “the impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us”, thereby fostering “a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections” that exist between human and non-human forms (Bennett, 2010, p. 4). To enable a clearer, more textured appreciation of how Hastrich portrays her inter-relational material engagements, and her highlighting of the agency of non-human, natural phenomena, we will now consider Overmann’s and Wynn’s study into human cognition and materiality and the agentic capacities of non-human forms in closer detail.

### **Materiality and Cognition: Thinking *Through* Materiality vs Thinking *About* Materiality**

Overmann and Wynn exemplify the evolution of materially motivated changes in cognition by tracing the historical development of human literacy:

... learning to read and write is *an interaction with a material form* that changes functionality in the fusiform gyrus (the part of the temporal lobe that recognizes objects), Broca’s and Wernicke’s areas (the main centers for producing and comprehending language), and Exner’s area (the part of the brain active in handwriting) (Overmann, 2016a). The Neolithic peoples who first realized literacy from the behavior of writing adapted a material form that would eventually yield unprecedented access to and meta-awareness of human conceptual domains (Olson, 1994; Olson & Cole, 2006; Watson & Horowitz, 2011). And species who were our remote ancestors interacted with stone tools in ways that may have produced conceptual thought in the first place (Coolidge & Wynn, 2018) (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 457-58, my emphasis)

Examining, *inter alia*, the kinds of changes within the brain that have occurred as a result of interacting with material entities such as writing and stone implements, Overmann and Wynn

highlight some of the specific drivers of these cognitive changes, and the time frames involved. Particularly relevant to the current discussion are their insights into our evolutionary development vis-à-vis material forms, whereby “*thinking through* materiality” has, in the case of humans—and only humans—lead to the “remarkable” cognitive capacity for “*thinking about* materiality” (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 458, 464). Affirming this cognitive development, Jane Bennett’s examination of agency between human and non-human forms (discussed below) highlights philosopher Bernard Stiegler’s interest in how “tool-use engendered a being with an inside . . . a psychological landscape of interiority”, due to the fact that “the materiality of the tool acted as an external marker of a past need, as an ‘archive’ of its function” (Bennett, 2010, p. 31). So, given that this evolution vis-à-vis human/material interactions has resulted in a distinct diminution of awareness, and conscious recognition of the nature and/or specific details of our engagements with material forms, how then can we effectively conceptualise Overmann’s and Wynn’s explication of our contrasting orientations to material engagements? More precisely, what are the differing parameters that delineate ‘*thinking through*’ from ‘*thinking about*’ materiality?

Put simply, Overmann’s and Wynn’s concept of ‘*thinking through*’ materiality refers to the automatic, unconscious form of interaction that modern humans execute when engaging with the plethora of material objects that are part and parcel of modern life. We do not generally have a specific “conscious awareness . . . of the implicit cognitive planning and execution” (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 463) when engaging with material forms and objects. Even when interacting with material entities that *do* initially require varying degrees of conscious awareness, such as learning to drive a car or ride a bicycle, these processes soon “become highly automated”, thereby enabling our “attentional resources to focus elsewhere” (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 463). As Overmann and Wynn explain, the high degree of automaticity that we attain, once proficient in such human/material engagements, can be demonstrated by the not uncommon occurrence of driving somewhere “that is familiar but unintended” (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 463). Similarly, the interactive human/material activities of reading and writing result in a streamlined integration of mental processing and “behavioural movements” with the material, such that deciding to move one’s eyes down the page constitute actions not easily separable from the comprehension of the language and understanding of the content (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 464).

Together with this automaticity of cognition as we became proficient in our interactive engagements with the material, the process of *thinking through* material forms also occurs with those specific devices that become “persistent parts of the body” (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 463). Objects such as spectacles, prosthetic limbs and pacemakers, for example, can all influence our proprioceptive and interoceptive bodily perceptions while gradually becoming “incorporated into the bodily space to the extent that they receive little conscious attention” (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 463). A fascinating, if more subtle form of *thinking through* material objects is evidenced in our use of material objects that are *not* designed to become incorporated into/onto the body. For example, the neurons responsible for finger control recognise tools as an extension of the hand, “allowing them to function as extended fingers” (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 464). And, in sighted people, visual space undergoes a cognitive

remapping, making “things within the extended reach of the tool seem nearer to them” (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 464). All these subtly different iterations of thinking *through* materiality demonstrate just a handful of the vast macrocosm of interactions we commonly have with technological artifacts and non-human forms—interactive processes that, as they become integral components of our cognition, are also largely unconscious. Overmann & Wynn posit that humans share this largely unconscious proclivity for “*thinking through* materiality” with most other species (2019, p. 464).

In contrast, the ability to think *about* objects in a manner that is separate from the processes involved in their use—the capacity to “form and manipulate concepts of them”, even when the material objects in question are not physically present and within our grasp—constitutes a superior level of cognitive thought that only humans possess (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 464). This ability to think *about* materiality evolved over “several million years of anthropoids making and using tools” (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 473). Gradually, our human ancestors’ capacity to think “through the materiality of stone tools gave us the ability to *think about* them as concepts” (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 473). So, to take the evolution of writing as an example, the act of thinking *through* material marks on surfaces, including “clay, papyrus, and bone” led to a different way of “*thinking about* concepts”, via a developing form of materiality that facilitated a cognitive capacity for “analysis, reflection, revision, and refinement”, all of which was “transmitted through space and time”, thereby enabling the human mind to become increasingly stimulated and educated (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 473).

Having arrived at this evolutionary cognitive and material moment, it should be noted that the “neural muscles” humans have now developed, allowing us to “both *think about* and *think through* materiality” constitute interactional processes that are far from static (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 473). As our interactions with materiality continue to develop our neurological capacity, brains continue to change—albeit in ways that we cannot accurately foresee, given that the timescales involved in assessing such changes “are multigenerational and longer” (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 473).

### **The Capacity of Materiality and Natural, Non-Human Forms for Agency and Vitality**

Investigating the agentic dimensions of specific spaces and material objects, and how they contribute to a distributed form of communication “between human and non-human semiotic agents” in an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) context, Letizia Caronia and Luigina Mortari helpfully summarise the primary goal of researchers who “focus on the ‘agency of things’” (2015, p. 401; 406). Such interrogations conceptualise “human activities and practice” as incorporating and encompassing the contributions of “artifacts, tools and architectural elements” (Caronia and Mortari, 2015, p. 406). From this perspective, “things make a difference, have effects and make us do things, thanks to us, but also despite us” (Caronia and Mortari, 2015, p. 406).

Applying a philosophical lens to this embedded dimension of power in material and non-human forms—a wide ranging set of entities that includes “natural bodies”, “technological artifacts” and “not-quite-human things” (2010, p. xiii; ix)—Jane Bennett’s notion of “thing-power”

(2010, p. 2) underscores the “energy” and “intensity” of materiality, and the “efficacy of objects” that exists over and above “the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve” (2010, p. 20). Such a stance is congruent with the contemporary ‘materialist turn’ which challenges the dominant 20<sup>th</sup> Century anthropocentric assumption that “matter . . . is a passive substance intrinsically devoid of meaning” (Gamble et al., 2019, p. 111). In *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things* (2010), Bennett’s ambitious aim is to demonstrate “the active role of *nonhuman* materials in public life”. In highlighting the “vitality intrinsic to materiality”, and its “active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness” (2010, p. 3), Bennett positions “thing-power” as a launching pad for the conceptualisation of a world “*beyond* [my emphasis] the life-matter binary”—the representative configuration constituting “the dominant organizational principle of adult experience” (2010, p. 2; 20). In so doing, Bennett pushes back against the widespread constructivist ideology predominating “among modern, secular, well-educated humans”, who invariably conceive ephemeral experiential encounters with “the out-side” as emanating from the “ultimate source” of “human agency” (2010, p. 17).

In contrast, vital materialists seek to embrace instances in “which they find themselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that they share with them” (Bennett, 2010, p. 17). Congruent with this notion of a shared vitality among the human and non-human—and with specific relevance to the latter stages of my discussion regarding Hastrich’s highlighting of agency and vitality vis-à-vis material and natural forms—Bennett underscores the “distributive” qualities of agency, which can operate collaboratively, cooperatively or interactively among “many bodies and forces” (2010, p. 21). For Bennett, agency’s ‘distributive’ qualities are clearly apparent when considering how humans and non-human forms are perpetually engaged “in an intricate dance with each other”, thereby embedding “human agency” within an “interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity” (Bennett, 2010, p. 31). So, rather than being confined to “a human body, or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts”, Bennett conceives agency—an integral component of “vital materialism”—as “distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field” (2010, p. 23).

### **“My Life and the Frame”: Thinking *Through* Materiality and Thinking *About* Materiality**

Overman’s and Wynn’s incisive investigation into the evolution of our cognitive engagements with the material world—the automatic, unconscious ways in which we think *through* our material involvements, as distinct from our habitual default setting of thinking *about* such interactions—help us to discern the layered psychological dimensions of Hastrich’s material engagements. Her autobiographical representations of these interactive human/material exchanges, which are both illuminating and instructive, are clearly showcased in her expansive essay, “My Life and the Frame”. Using this essay as a case study, I now examine how Hastrich articulates particular cognitive orientations that are congruent with thinking *through* material engagements, insights that are counter-balanced with the benefits of thinking *about* the human/material exchange. In “My Life and the Frame”, the author’s positive experiences as a television camera operator are interwoven with less successful interactive engagements with materially inscribed artifacts, including a school art project and, in later years, a colonial

baroque novel. In recalling these activities, Hastrich's narration deftly articulates the slippery psychological minutia of her inter-relational human/material exchanges with these artifacts, all of which relate to her fascination with 'the frame', and the countless possibilities frames afford for "selection and composition" (Hastrich, 2019, p. 33).

Hastrich's calibrated consideration of her material interactions, which can be understood in terms of effecting consistent focal shifts between thinking *through* and thinking *about* her interchanges with various framing devices, is succinctly captured in the essay's opening paragraphs. Initially, she notes that her chief interest in becoming a camera operator (filming Australian Rules football games for the ABC in Perth), was the resulting ability to put "a frame around things", thereby creating a "halo of attention" (2019, p. 33) that lasted for as long as possible, before the object of focus moved out of reach. In these opening observations, Hastrich thinks *about* the material form of the camera frame—how it facilitates her enjoyment of delineating her chosen subjects and controlling the focal gaze. Applying a wide-angled, retrospective assessment, she describes the "thrilling" feeling of "wielding . . . this halo of attention" (2019, p. 33). These opening remarks firmly position Hastrich as the agent in charge of the material form of the camera frame, but, as we will later discover, this anthropocentric assumption of human agency over the non-human oscillates between herself and the objects of discussion, both here and throughout the memoir.

Immediately following this broad-brush interpretation, wherein thinking *about* the material form of the camera frame allows her to summarise the appeal of the camera's ability to frame her subjects, Hastrich narrows her focus, zeroing in on the nature of her interactive material engagements. In so doing, she thereby shifts her narrational lens to instead consider how the optimal framing technique can be achieved. And in attempting to explain the 'how' of this interactive human/material exchange, Hastrich's assessment bypasses our evolved capacity to think *about* materiality, to instead highlight the importance of thinking *through* her material involvement with the frame. In so doing, Hastrich overtly draws our attention to a perspective on our inter-relational engagements with materiality that is not usually, as we have seen, a conscious area of human focus—one that instead aligns with the ways in which most other "species engage material forms in general" (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 464). In selecting and composing her subjects, and striving to capture her "halo of attention" for the optimum time, Hastrich states that this interactive activity with the non-human form of the camera "involved a deep level of concentration, of unthinking (the same sort from which the best writing comes), and letting the body be, to do what it needs to do, what it knows to do without instruction" (2019, p. 33-34).

Resonating with the ancestral beginnings of human/material engagements, whereby early humans, whose cognitive capacities had not yet been endowed with the ability to think *about* material forms, instead focused solely on accomplishing actions with objects, Hastrich's recommendation for achieving the best camera footage (and the best writing quality, which we will presently consider), in effect argues for a circumvention of our current capabilities vis-à-vis the material, returning to earlier, pre-modern modes of thinking *through* the material. Given our extensive evolutionary journey along the interactive human/material spectrum, and mindful

(as noted earlier), that this evolutionary development has literally *changed* our brains, it is perhaps unsurprising that Hastrich is a little light on detail as to the ‘how’ of her recommendation of “unthinking” (2019, p. 33)—aligning as it does with the predominantly unconscious, automatic processes that characterise the human ability to think *through* the material. In attempting to explicate her point, Hastrich describes the “special genius” of “Old Ray”, whose expertise with a “close-up camera” lens allowed him to:

hold a tight shot of a far distant kicker, then whip-pan unerringly to the catcher before the ball arrives, somehow divining not just the intended destination, but the actual. To appreciate the skill in this, you have to understand that during the pan the viewfinder is no assistance: at that speed, on that lens, all vision is blurred (2019, p. 34).

The fact that this example, similarly to her earlier notion of ‘unthinking’, elides any specific, step-by-step instructions about how to actually achieve this expert level of material interaction does not, however, negate the benefits of engaging with these insights. Hastrich’s calibrated discussion of this material interchange requires the reader to recognise that there is more to embrace vis-à-vis human/material involvements than our usual default position of adopting a bird’s eye view, and making general, retrospective assessments of these material interchanges—aligning with the more commonplace cognitive orientation of standing back and thinking *about* the nature of these interactions. Such a position results in more generalised assessments that habitually address the ‘*what*’ of human/non-human exchanges, rather than the ‘*how*’.

Continuing this carefully delineated discussion of both the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of her inter-relational material involvements, Hastrich’s narration in the passages below refocuses on her interactional exchange with the camera. And again, her best practice advice is congruent with thinking *through* the material form of the camera, while once more falling short of explaining the specific cognitive processes that enable the high level of competency she wishes to convey. Having described the audiovisual team’s set up and pre-game responsibilities, Hastrich shifts to the ‘how’ of her engagement with the camera, an orientation that is emphasised by a subtle change in her prose style, whereby two consecutive imperative constructions lend a linguistic charge, urging the reader to attend to the intricacies of this inter-relational exchange among the human operator, the camera, and the focal subject:

Come into my viewfinder. See what a glorious thing it is to move with this young man as he runs, swooping with him as he scoops the ball one-handed from the ground [. . .] He’s travelling left to right; we give him running room, or looking room as it’s called in the trade, keeping him back near the left-hand edge so he’s got an open space ahead, otherwise he’ll seem in danger of banking up against the wall of the right-hand edge, the frame suddenly turned into a prison cell.

He sprints . . . I’m keeping up, in all my movements fluid, pulling focus while panning, zooming. In one ear of my headset the van people are talking, commentators blurt into the other, but I’m hearing nothing. I’m in the beautiful blank zone of the picture for as long as it keeps going. Don’t think, don’t think, as soon as I think I’ll throw focus

forward instead of back and all that swift joy will dissolve into shameful blur; the worst of it will be the rock back and forth, the panic to find sharpness again, *Which way?*, the indecision. Don't think, stay in the blank, it can't last forever, it's already been too good for too long (Hastrich, 2019, p. 36-7).

Assertively instructing, rather than inviting us, via the commands to 'come into' and 'see', thereby concentrating readerly attention on the internal processes of these interactions between herself and the camera, this textual construction also strives to reduce the narrative distance by positioning us 'inside' the action. And, once more, two clear mental orientations emerge in relation to the nature of this human/material engagement. The passages that convey Hastrich's thoughts *about* her material interactions, which focus on outcome, give us a more precise, detailed level of explanation than those focusing on the *how* of this process—the automatic thinking *through* cognitive orientation to materiality which, in constituting the opposite mental process to thinking *about* this human/non-human exchange, continues to align with a shadowy, narratively difficult-to-grasp concept of 'unthinking': "Don't think" (2019, p. 37).

In this instance, however, some practical information pertaining to the mechanics of the human/material interaction—the 'thinking *through*' of the camera operation—is proffered. We learn, for example, about the notion of maintaining "running room" with regard to the spatial placement of the footballer, which, when travelling from left to right, means keeping him "near the left-hand edge" of the viewfinder, thereby ensuring the optimal position of the subject within the frame (2019, p. 36). And even though Hastrich consistently elects both here, and later in this essay, to stress the importance of the operating techniques and mechanics of this interaction—the thinking *through* of her engagement with the camera—these technical specifics once more elude her narrational grasp. Rather, Hastrich doubles down on this absence of cognitive formulations or strategies, by repeatedly resorting to the emphatic command "don't think", as she struggles to articulate what has clearly become a thoroughly automatic, unconscious material interaction between herself and the camera (2019, p. 37). Indeed, the crucial importance of needing to acknowledge the process of thinking *through*, instead of thinking *about* this interaction with materiality, is embedded in these exhortations to *desist* from thinking—with the competing temptation to think *about* the interactional process clearly aligned with the risk of ruining the whole activity, thereby resulting in the perfectly placed focal subject 'dissolv[ing] into shameful blur' (Hastrich, 2019, p. 37).

In concluding Part I of this nine-part essay shortly thereafter, Hastrich's penultimate observations on the nature of her human/material interaction with the camera—once the rain sets in and the light fades—comprise a blend of thinking *through* *and* *about* this activity: "Tweaking will be constant. I have no choice but to trust the unseen wire between my eye and my right hand. Let my body do its best" (2019, p. 39). After a brief mention of 'tweaking', congruent with thinking *about* this operational exchange, the narrational references to trusting the invisible wire and allowing the body to 'do its best' once again foreground the operational dimension of thinking *through* the material exchange with the camera, without providing any concrete details on how best to achieve this interchange. The final sentence of this section firmly underscores the narrative prioritisation, both here and throughout the memoir, of paying

attention to, and acknowledging the importance of, the ‘how’ of human/material interactions, even if such considerations are short on instructional detail: “In those moments, moment by moment, so long ago, what was it I really framed? Perhaps it was endeavour” (2019, p. 39). By answering this rhetorical question—a construction that comprises a distanced narratorial position of thinking *about* the process—with the word ‘endeavour’, Hastrich’s repositioning of her interpretive lens serves to emphasise the importance of the *operational* dimensions, or ‘*how to*’ of this interactive human /material exchange—although this observation again elides the specifics of what has obviously become a largely automatic interactive activity.

Hastrich’s consistent bi-focal consideration of thinking *about* and thinking *through* the nature of her material interactions is crafted into an effective synthesis in this essay’s latter stages. After describing various aspects of her enthusiastic, yet apparently futile attempts to create a colonial baroque novel, there is a bald admission that, at least “for the time being”, the “novel had failed . . . My material was exhausted, I was exhausted. I needed to take stock. I needed to repair” (2019, p. 53). Hastrich’s antidote to this predicament is to “go fallow” (53). In other words, she decides to stop thinking *about* the novel, to instead try to think *through* this material interaction between herself and her writing process:

I decided to go fallow.

The more I thought about it the more I warmed to the idea: I would go dormant but in a way that was still active. If I opened myself up and calmly listened, there might be all sorts of things to hear—things I didn’t immediately have to turn into something else, as writers often feel compelled to do. In fact, I would be anti-production. I would read and walk and look at art and people and nature, and I would let whatever came my way wash over me and through me, and then let it go (2019, p. 53).

In deciding to change her strategy and go ‘fallow’—a delicate interplay of dormancy and activity, akin to thinking *through*, rather than continuing to think *about* the interactive human/non-human interchange with her creative writing project—Hastrich strives for a less concentrated, more organic approach. Her aim is to resist thinking *about* the production of the work itself, to instead favour an immersive, interactive orientation. She will permit the impetus, in the form of the inspiration, knowledge and ideas required in order to progress her novel, to ‘wash over’ and ‘through’ her, in an effort to prioritise thinking *through* the act of production, rather than thinking *about* the holistic concept of a colonial baroque novel—a much-needed repositioning of her cognitive orientation, given that thinking *about* this project had come to represent “a desolate dribbling away of time” (2019, p. 54).

As she negotiates this ‘fallow’ period of trying to think *through* the mechanics of production, rather than actively think *about* her novel as a whole, Hastrich describes the pleasurable experience of reading about successful visual artists such as David Hockney, who “talk[ed] *about* their work and ways of seeing” (2019, p. 54, my emphasis). But, true to her intended focus, the information she chooses to highlight in fact concentrates on the processes Hockney uses to think *through* his own human/material interactions, including his creation of “artworks” that, as Hastrich points out, are “not an end in themselves but part of his ongoing engagement

with visual perception” (2019, p. 54). Here, Hockney’s experimental approach when investigating “something he’s noticed, or when moved to interrogate an accepted orthodoxy” (2019, p. 54), is congruent with thinking *through* his interactive exchange with visual materiality as he develops his creative process. Continuing to home in on other visual artists’ effective approaches to their human/material interactions—involvements that are clearly oriented towards thinking *through* these involvements as they interrogate the deeper mechanisms of engagement, rather than thinking *about* their creative material outputs more broadly—Hastrich’s description of Hockney’s experimentation with “a nine-way split screen” (2019, p. 55) precisely pinpoints the unconscious mode of automatic engagement with non-human forms that constitutes the hallmark of thinking *through* the material:

Essentially, he [Hockney] and his assistants had made a very fluid lens. They’d succeeded in making a flat picture that allowed the eye to look the way it likes to look in real life—roving and taking in multiple things in a split second (Hastrich, 2019, p. 56).

In then conveying the details of her own response to this style of unconscious, interactive engagement between the materiality of the screen and human vision, Hastrich successfully captures—in a way that the notion of ‘unthinking’ does not—the elusive quality of automaticity so essential to the cognitive process of thinking *through* our material engagements:

When I watched the hawthorn video online, I found it unexpectedly involving. It was surprisingly beautiful, for starters, but I was drawn in to it—became almost latched on to it—because it really did command the physical engagement of my eye. I *entered* the picture, moving past the psychological fence of the frame (Hastrich, 2019, p. 56).

In electing to highlight the immersive nature of her involvement with the material object—wherein she feels as if she has ‘*entered* the picture’ itself, her focus completely oblivious to the material form of the audiovisual technology—Hastrich now provides a relatable experiential portrait of the unconscious dimension of human perception that characterises our ability to think *through* our operational engagements with non-human forms.

Following these representations, which strive to articulate the ‘how’ of thinking *through* her own and other artists’ engagements with the material as she negotiates the ‘fallow period’ of production vis-à-vis her baroque novel, the essay’s concluding paragraphs underscore the benefits of her decision to prioritise thinking *through* her writing process. By actively desisting from thinking *about* the novel in a holistic way, to instead focus her efforts on trying to think *through* different styles of engagement with literary modes of representation, Hastrich finds that her mind has been sufficiently liberated to now formulate a new avenue of production—an outcome that is facilitated by shifting her cognitive focus back to thinking *about* alternative forms of narrative representation: “An outside prompt got me thinking about the essay, a form I’d never considered, and before I knew it, I was writing one” (2019, p. 65).

In drawing this extended meditation on her inter-relational material engagements to a close, the two paragraphs immediately following this observation constitute a succinct synthesis of

the competing cognitive approaches to material involvements that have been showcased throughout this essay, and the memoir more broadly:

I have begun to think of the essay as my new frame. In wielding it I feel closest to my camera days. I didn't realise how much I missed it, that restless frame: alighting, adoring, inquiring; ignoring noise and distraction; widening out, zooming in. And moving on.

The viewfinder of the essay may well help me find the missing thing I need to bring back to the novel, but even if it doesn't, it's been useful. It's made obvious to me the tension of the frame, and I find that interesting. Thinking about what it includes, what it excludes; the way the frame nags: by its very existence making us long for a borderless place, where landscape, life and art are indivisible (2019, p. 65).

Congruent with thinking *through* her material processes, Hastrich's penultimate paragraph juxtapositions the framing capabilities of the essay form with that of the camera. And in so doing, she effectively distils the key operating mechanisms of her engagements with the camera as she expertly wields her viewfinder: "alighting, adoring, inquiring; ignoring noise and distraction; widening out, zooming in. And moving on" (2019, p. 65). Having considered the 'how' of her material engagement with these references to the operational minutia of her exchanges, the final paragraph demonstrates a clear focal shift, wherein Hastrich steps back to think *about* these interchanges, particularly in terms of the advantages she is now able to perceive as she assesses the contours of this generic reframing—especially the possibilities that the device of a frame offers in terms of inclusion and exclusion.

These final thoughts about the frame, which draw together aspects of both thinking *through* and thinking *about* the material interactions Hastrich has been exploring, serve to elevate her discussion one step further: "the way the frame nags: by its very existence making us long for a borderless place, where landscape, life and art are indivisible" (2019, p. 65). In imagining an experiential vision that, unencumbered by defined edges, expansively embraces 'landscape, life and art', Hastrich embeds the cognitive dimension of thinking *through* the materiality of the frame, explored throughout the essay, into thinking *about* the framing properties of the written essay form—which, as we have seen, is inextricably interwoven with the material—and the yearning to escape the ever-present experiential reality of frames and borders altogether. And, when stepping away from the text and further pondering these carefully delineated explorations of Hastrich's various material interchanges, we might also take a moment to marvel at the evolution of this "wonderful and unique" cognitive capacity: namely, the human mind's ability to comprehend and evaluate such complex inter-relational material exchanges in the complete "absence of the material structures themselves" (Overmann & Wynn, 2019, p. 464).

### **The Agency and Vitality of Art, Words and Water**

Deepening our awareness of "the complicated web of dissonant connections" (Bennett, 2010, p. 4) between human cognition and material forms that Hastrich has been exploring via her interactions with framing devices, her autobiographical lens consistently encompasses the

embedded dimensions of agency and vitality in material and non-human forms, aptly demonstrating how these traits are enmeshed within our “interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity” (Bennett, 2010, p. 31). Throughout “My Life and the Frame”, much of Hastrich’s focus on her material interactions highlights aspects of distributive agency—both in relation to the camera and baroque artworks. For example, unless she affords sufficient “running room”, as the camera operator, “the frame suddenly turn[s] into a prison cell” (2019, p. 37). And inevitably, the action comes too close, “cannot be contained” and “the composition in . . . [her] frame flies apart” (2019, p. 37). Further underscoring this aspect of distributive agency between the human operator and the materiality of the camera, Hastrich refers to the camera as her “dancing partner”, before refocusing on her techniques of sweeping, roving and selecting (2019, p. 38). In once more positioning the camera frame as the agent, Hastrich then affirms its ability to put “a little dignity around something that ordinarily manages without” (2019, p. 38).

Maintaining her focus on material agency, the narration emphasises, via impassioned rhetorical questions, the energetic, vital characteristics of baroque artworks:

Who could resist the baroque’s V8 throb, its largesse and exuberance, its struggle with light and dark? Its willingness to slum it while depicting the divine? Its love of risk? [. . .]

So much about the baroque is modern: the mixing of media to achieve maximum effect; its kinetic desire; its interactivity—the way it sometimes bursts out of the frame to claim attention, pouring itself forth, playing also with the idea of witnesses, viewers, participants, peeking in and climbing out. With its widespread use of trompe l’oeil, the baroque seeks to extend reality, and perhaps ecstatically warp it, too (41).

In then discussing the baroque “Wurzburg fresco” by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, wherein “the action”, similarly to the footballers in her viewfinder, “threatens to spill out of the frame—then actually does” (2019, p. 44), Hastrich intensifies this artwork’s agentic capacity, rendering this man-made artifact itself as the primary source of vitality—a force so powerful that it cannot be contained:

The blurring of the edge between realms is complete and the painted world is so thoroughly activated it cannot be enclosed. Untidy, barbaric, joyous, it pours out into the thoroughfare of the staircase, a transit place of real people and real movement. This is Art wanting to meet life (2019, p. 44-45).

Continuing to examine Hastrich’s interweaving of vitality and agency, materiality and non-human forms in her experiential portrayals, we will now consider some interrelated examples concerning writing and the ocean’s tidal forces.

The passage below describes Hastrich’s ongoing tussles with words and writing in her first essay, “The Hole”. Ascribing not only a strong sense of agency and autonomy, but also a clear material dimension to words themselves—“beautiful. . . things” that emerge from, and

disappear into “the channels” of the deep—Hastrich simultaneously confers on them a fluid, rhythmic motion, reinforced by her concurrent discussion of tidal flows:

I am a writer for whom words are usually scarce. I find them mesmerising: beautiful, strange, powerful things that take trouble to marshal. They tantalise, sometimes presenting themselves, sometimes retreating. Up they come in their own good time from the channels by the sandbanks, from the leases, from the Hole (2019, p. 18).

Initially hinting that words, as material entities, contain an inner power that can render them difficult for the human mind to harness or ‘marshal’, Hastrich develops this notion, acknowledging their independent energy and force, as they tease and ‘tantalise’, evading her grasp and coming and going of their own volition. And, in crafting the specific linguistic arrangement of “They tantalise, sometimes presenting themselves, sometimes retreating” (2019, p. 18), Hastrich introduces elements of repetition and rhythm that evoke the ungovernable power and propulsion of the tides. Resonating with the natural force of the ocean, the final sentence: “Up they come in their own good time from the channels by the sand banks, from the leases, from the Hole” (2019, p. 18), reinforces both the independent, autonomous dimensions of words and their material dimension.

In the next paragraph, Hastrich muses on her dying thoughts, which, she imagines, will dwell on her favoured “watery paths” of “childhood”, including her recollections of sitting “in the *Squid*, watching the slowing drag of the tide [. . .] Away it will slip, under me” (2019, p. 19). Although the subject of words is not explicitly mentioned here, these thoughts effectively amplify the attributes of energy and power she has been ascribing to the agentic material dimension of words, which are also metaphorically linked to the chambers of the deep—“the channels”, “the leases”, “the Hole”—and to the continual forward and backward push and pull of the tides—“sometimes presenting, sometimes retreating” (Hastrich, 2019, p. 18). These tidal references underscore the potent, more-than-human energy of the ocean, and the power of words which—in both in a material and metaphorical sense—reside there.

This notion of the ocean’s vitality and agency is later expanded in Hastrich’s fifth essay, “The Tomb of Human Curiosity”. Describing her visit to the “tide room” at Fort Denison in Sydney Harbour, Hastrich notes the “basic” yet ingenious “sign of human agency” (2019, p. 107) in the way New South Wales tides have been recorded

since 1857, when a benchmark was cut into the outer wall of the tower. Tides are recorded as so many millimetres above or below a zero. But the zero is arbitrary. It’s just a mark at an accessible point that can be easily observed (2019, p. 106-7).

In evaluating this “sign of human agency” as “a scratched statement of will towards the understanding of something immense”, Hastrich implies a shared, if unequally weighted dimension of distributive agency between the human symbol of measurement—“just a mark”—and the “immense” power of the ocean’s tides (2019, p. 107). In adjusting the agentic balance between humans’ material recordings of measurement and the natural, non-human forces of the ocean tides back to a more equalised footing a paragraph later, the narration

conveys a vivid visual image of Bennett’s concept of a “heterogeneous assemblage”, wherein the “diverse elements” (Bennett, 2010, p. 23) of human ingenuity and the innate power of the ocean work in harmony. Vivifying this concept of distributive agency, Hastrich draws attention to some older, less sophisticated recording machinery in the tide room, “where a float is attached by a rod to a pen, which is poised over a turning drum loaded with chart paper. With the spidery finger of the pen, the tide draws itself” (107). In concluding this section of her essay, Hastrich briefly expands on this example of a co-operative, distributive agency between humans and the natural world, wherein she imaginatively reconfigures the assemblage, applying the same principle to the artistic creation of a “stretching sea” that could “paint itself, or make music. I’d like to hear the harmonic dictation of the tides” (2019, p. 107). The distributive form of agency that emerges in this specific context among humans, tidal forces and an island ‘tower’ provides an interesting contrast to the agency inherent in tidal flows on the shoreline. As Laura Bissell has shown, the tidal elements in other island contexts have the power to erase human performative “acts of remembrance” on sandy shores, thereby “simultaneously” rendering them “acts of forgetting” (2020, p. 177).

## Conclusion

Notwithstanding the slowly growing cultural perception in this epoch of the Anthropocene of the enmeshed nature of the human and non-human world, and the dawning realisation that human agency has always operated within an “interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity” (Bennett, 2010, p. 31), contemporary narratives, including autobiographical texts, do not predominantly thematise the psychological minutia of the authorial ‘I’'s interchanges with materiality and/or non-human forms, nor do they consistently draw out inter-relational engagements with agentic forces and vital characteristics of the more-than-human. Yet, as we have discovered in just a few of the many examples of interwoven human and non-human exchanges that abound in *Night Fishing*, our interior landscapes and physical bodies are inextricably enmeshed in, and shaped by, the non-human world. So, quite apart from the rhetorical power and perceptual acuity of Hastrich’s narrative explication of inter-relational engagements with technological and artistic artifacts and non-human forms, I suggest that the revelatory force of this innovative memoir resides in the author’s ability to simultaneously entertain and educate us, increasing our recognition of, and sensitivity to, the competing cognitive orientations that impact our material interactions, and the potent dimensions of energy, vitality, and agency that emerge in our inter-relational exchanges with the non-human.

## Notes

[1] See online review by Janine Rizzetti, 2020, par. 4.

[2] Carl Knappett’s *Thinking through material culture: An interdisciplinary perspective* (2005) provides an extended analysis, at the intersections of archeology, anthropology, the cognitive sciences, psychological and social sciences, art history, semiology and philosophy, of how semiology and pragmatics coalesce to produce meaning vis-à-vis material culture.

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### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this paper for their encouragement and incisive commentaries.