

TANGIBLE THINGS: THE MATTER OF SUSAN HOWE

by

THOMAS LEWEK

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2018

© 2018

Thomas Lewek

All Rights Reserved

Tangible Things: The Matter of Susan Howe

by

Thomas Lewek

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Date

Matthew K. Gold

Adviser

Date

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis

Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Tangible Things: The Matter of Susan Howe

by

Thomas Lewek

Adviser: Matthew K. Gold

“Tangible Things: The Matter of Susan Howe” examines materiality in two books, *That This* (2010) and *Debths* (2017), by the contemporary American experimental poet Susan Howe. More specifically, this examination finds a double movement in both collections between foregrounding the materiality of writing and of the text and meditating on the vibrant nature of matter itself. To frame the first part of this double movement, the thesis draws on recent digital humanities scholarship from Matthew Kirschenbaum and Johanna Drucker that highlights the technologically and materially mediated nature of writing processes and the texts they produce. Then, to frame the second part, it explores Jane Bennett’s new materialism, particularly its claim that all human and nonhuman matter coalesce into assemblages thereby displaying and developing an immanent “thing-power.” Within Howe’s work, both parts of this double movement play off of each other. Her books use prose, verse, and visual design to announce their materialities in order to articulate an ontological claim about matter. *That This* contains details of Howe’s archival research, minimalist page layouts, and clashing word collages. These elements certainly underscore the physicality of her medium; they also accentuate her recollections of her deceased husband and the manner in which the things she had long associated with him channel

and conduct those recollections. Meanwhile, *Debths* includes odes to Howe's most beloved editions and similarly minimalist page layouts and clashing word collages. These features again emphasize the materiality of her work; simultaneously, they amplify her claim that nonhuman things structure our temporal experiences. Howe's later work, in this respect, always materializes experience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of many individuals. For their intelligence and inspiration, I would like to thank my professors, particularly Joan Richardson, Lisa Rhody, Christopher Schmidt, and Mary Ann Caws; my adviser Matt Gold; my fellow students; and, of course, my loving partner Rose.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Copyright	ii
Approval	iii
Abstract	iv
Acknowledgements	vi
List of Figures	viii
I. Introduction	1
II. Writing, the Text, and Materiality	4
III. The Matter of New Materialism	16
IV. The Double Movements of <i>That This</i> and <i>Debths</i>	27
Appendix: Figures	50
Works Cited	55

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	50
Figure 2	51
Figure 3	52
Figure 4	52
Figure 5	53
Figure 6	54

I. Introduction

While Susan Howe has written experimental poetry for nearly five decades now, she was once a different type of experimental artist. Throughout the 1960s, she was an abstract expressionist painter and part of New York's downtown arts scene. Her transformation from painter to poet, in fact, did not begin until she and her second husband, David von Schlegell, had decamped to Guilford, Connecticut in 1972. Von Schlegell had accepted a position in sculpture at Yale University's School of Art, but Howe still seemed drawn to Manhattan. As she explains in a 2005 interview in *Free Verse*, she returned to the city weekly during that time, subletting studio space from the painter Marcia Hafif on Crosby Street in SoHo. In the early 1970s, Hafif had immersed herself in a project that involved covering notebook pages, from top to bottom and from side to side, with words. Howe soon immersed herself in a similar project. Cutting the names of plants, birds, boats, and other things from newspapers and magazines, she arranged and rearranged these fragments in her own five-by-six-inch black notebooks (*Free Verse*). (Howe has used these same notebooks throughout her career; visitors to Yale's Beinecke Library can request and view many of them, which contain personal reflections, quotations from various philosophers and poets, and, of course, early drafts of her verse ["Susan Howe Papers"].) As she filled more and more of these notebooks, Howe realized that her arrangements and rearrangements mattered. Margins mattered, line breaks mattered, and the words no longer seemed so unrelated (*Free Verse*). When Ted Greenwald, then the director of a poetry workshop at Saint Mark's Church in Manhattan's East Village, examined the notebooks, he agreed and encouraged Howe to view them less as art objects and more as poetry (*Free Verse*). By 1974, she had indeed regarded this work as poetry and published *Hinge Picture*, her first collection. Although I will not examine Howe's transformation from painter to poet, or her relationships

with experimental artists in 1960s and 1970s New York, or even her first published collection, this anecdote highlights two aspects of her work central to this thesis.

First, it foregrounds how writing always remains a material process and the text always remains a material entity. At first glance, both statements might seem obvious—clearly we use various analog and digital materials to compose and consume text. That obviousness, however, often recedes into forgetfulness. We know that writing on a computer requires glass, metal, plastic, and electricity or that a book contains paper, ink, and glue, and because we know this those materials evanesce. Howe’s work resists this. Writing, for her, involves both common (pen, paper, computer) and uncommon (scissors, copiers, archives) materials. Indeed, her experience in Hafif’s loft in the early 1970s prefigures a career where such practices—cutting, copying, and arranging fragments—became integral to her writing processes. Simultaneously, Howe’s texts never erase the materials from which they emerge but foreground them. Her books employ everything from copious white space to word collages to photograms. Again, Howe’s time in that SoHo loft seems to prefigure her career as a poet here—those five-by-six-inch black notebooks emphasize their constituent materials. The first section of this thesis, “Writing, the Text, and Materiality,” explains the importance of these practices. That explanation involves a brief survey of some of the basic premises of textual scholarship, including its emphasis on the material circumstances of a text’s production. Yet it ultimately examines the work of contemporary digital humanists like Matthew Kirschenbaum and Johanna Drucker who extend those basic premises to explore writing, the text, and materiality in the context of increasing digital writing technologies.

Second, this anecdote highlights Howe’s preoccupation with the nature of matter itself. Cutting the names of plants, birds, boats, and other things from old newspapers and then

arranging them in notebooks certainly seems like a textual practice. At the same time, however, it also seems like an ontological claim. Bruno Latour, the French philosopher of science, has developed something called Actor Network Theory (ANT) throughout his career. Put simply, ANT holds that all entities—human and nonhuman alike—interact within networks without rigid ontological hierarchies. In Latour’s words, it “reinjects” things—non-sentient objects—into our understanding of society by reminding us that we, as humans, are “on par” with all other entities (370, 377). The difference between human and nonhuman, then, is one of degree, not kind.

Howe’s time in Hafif’s loft, spent assembling, arranging, and rearranging many disparate things (or text denoting many disparate things), seems to accomplish something similar in its suggestion that such entities exist together on a shared plane. And it, too, seems to prefigure a career where such assembly, arrangement, and rearrangement of disparate things becomes commonplace in her poetry. The second section of this thesis, “The Matter of New Materialism,” frames Howe’s preoccupation with matter by exploring Jane Bennett’s new materialism and her discussion of the assemblage, a concept initially developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Influenced by Latour, Deleuze, Guattari, and many other materialist, monist, and pragmatic thinkers, Bennett promotes a flatter ontology where the difference between human and nonhuman blurs. Within this ontology, however, agency arises not from one localized, human entity but from many distributed, human and nonhuman entities that coalesce into an assemblage. Indeed, within this assemblage, all of these entities demonstrate and develop some power. As Bennett suggests, if we look closely enough at any productive effect, we will understand that it emerges from the grouping of many disparate things.

Although Howe displayed her material practices and her preoccupation with matter on Crosby Street in the early 1970s, this thesis ultimately examines two of her later works *That This*

(2010) and *Debths* (2017). In both books, Howe moves between foregrounding the materiality of writing and of the text and meditating on the nature of matter itself. Indeed, each movement interacts with and plays off the other. The third section of this thesis, “The Double Movements of *That This* and *Debths*,” explores this in greater detail. The prose, poetry, page layouts, photograms, and word collages of *That This*, for example, ensure that we always register its physicality. They attune us to the materials integral to its production, and they remind us of the materials that comprise it. Simultaneously, *That This* makes an ontological claim about matter when Howe considers the death of her husband, Peter Hare, through the things she has long associated with him. Howe, Hare, and things as variegated as a blue plastic sheath, an oil painting, and a desk coalesce into assemblages and produce affecting responses. *Debths*, meanwhile, employs many of the same techniques as *That This* to call attention to the materiality of her medium. Howe’s prose, poetry, page layout, and word collages again remind us not only that writing requires many materials, but also that many materials comprise the text itself. This, in turn, reinforces an ontological claim similar to the one presented in *That This*—that human and nonhuman things merge into assemblages, demonstrate and develop their power, and engender productive effects. Yet *Debths* accomplishes this by exploring how temporal experiences—Howe’s own senses of past, present, and future—remain mediated by things. The double movement between materialization and ontological claim, then, exists in both books but unfolds in different manners. Four decades after those experiments in Hafif’s loft, Howe remains as interested as ever in these topics.

II. Writing, the Text, and Materiality

In a 2011 interview with *Poets.org*, Howe details her writing process for *That This*. Long a lover of libraries and archives, she describes the “thrill” of seeing the eighteenth-century

preacher Jonathan Edwards's manuscripts at the Beinecke Library in 2007. At the time, Howe was combing through this collection while preparing an essay on the connections between Edwards and the twentieth-century poet Wallace Stevens. By chance, Howe came across a folder containing the letters of Hannah Edwards Wetmore, one of Jonathan's ten sisters. Struck by the handwriting and a quotation from psalm 55 ("Oh that I had wings like a dove! [for then] would I fly away, and be at rest"), Howe transcribed these manuscripts and returned home ("Open Field"). There, she printed the transcriptions and "using multi-purpose copy paper, scissors, 'invisible' scotch tape, and a Canon copier PC170," she "collaged" fragments of these printed transcriptions with fragments of other texts ("Open Field"). This process seems anything but straightforward. To write *That This*, Howe relied on the institutional riches of the Beinecke, the eighteenth-century manuscripts of Edwards and his family, her own computer, copy paper, scotch tape, a Canon copier PC170, "other texts," and the various editors, designers, and typesetters employed by or through New Directions to transform her vision into a book. This short account highlights the complex and material nature of both writing and the text.¹ It also demonstrates that both Howe's writing and Howe herself acknowledge—and even emphasize—that nature (the ironic quotation marks enclosing "invisible," for example, suggest that writing is always visible). But why should we care about the Beinecke, the scotch tape, the Canon copier PC170, or New Directions? How does understanding the contexts of a work's production help us understand the work itself?

Textual scholarship has long argued that we can never fully separate a text from the material conditions of its production, and recent digital humanities scholarship has elaborated upon this argument. The work of Matthew Kirschenbaum and Johanna Drucker represent two

¹ A brief note on terminology: "writing" and "the text" have specific meanings throughout this thesis. Where the former refers to the composition process, the latter refers to the product of that process.

such examples. In *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing* (2016), Kirschenbaum surveys the development of word processing technologies to examine their effects on writing itself. While he refrains from making any sweeping arguments, Kirschenbaum does suggest that the widespread adoption of word processing technologies in the late twentieth century neither dematerialized nor automated writing. Instead, it introduced new materials (plastic, glass, light, electronic bits) and new roles (typist, desktop publisher) into the writing process. *Track Changes*, in other words, remains sensitive to the material and social conditions of that process. New digital technologies might seem immaterial and impersonal in our contemporary cultural imagination, but they are not. Drucker underscores and extends many of these points. We should, in her view, never regard writing as ethereal. Instead, and regardless of media, writing constitutes a multifaceted process that involves not only the imaginative capacities of the writer but also the material conditions surrounding him or her. Similarly, the text's meaning and the text's materiality do not exist in separate, independent realms. All of the text's textual and graphic entities (type, margins, trim) form a system through which meaning arises. Kirschenbaum and Drucker examine different subjects from different angles here—where Kirschenbaum concerns himself with the literary-historical significance of shifting writing technologies, Drucker concerns herself with the theoretical implications of the complex and material nature of writing and the text. Viewed together, however, they provide some grounding for understanding how, for example, textual fragments transcribed, printed, cut, copied, and assembled on a page articulate their own materiality and attune us to matter more generally.

Before going further, I want to contextualize the work of Kirschenbaum and Drucker through a short survey of textual scholarship, as both acknowledge its impact on their own thought. The opening chapter of *Track Changes*, for example, remarks that while textual

scholarship has devoted little time to word processing, its importance—its emphasis on “knowing the material history” of texts—suggests that this will change (26). And Drucker, in her 2013 essay “What Is Graphic Textuality,” writes that she has recently “come under the influence of bibliographical studies and textual theory” (68). What exactly textual scholarship constitutes—and where studies of word processing, “bibliographical studies,” and “textual theory” fit into textual scholarship—remains contested, though David Greetham has offered some explanations. In *Textual Scholarship: An Introduction* (1994), he argues that “textual scholars study *process* (the historical stages in the production, transmission, and reception of texts), not just *product* (the text resulting from such production, transmissions, and reception)” (2). Where other scholars might consider the text at hand, textual scholars consider how that text became the text at hand. They historicize it, and they understand the technologies used to produce, transmit, and receive it. Indeed, Greetham stresses that textual scholars “must be familiar with the technical processes by which documents were created” (4). They study the ink, paper, type, binding, and the myriad other details of their production. By emphasizing process *and* product, and by attending to the technicalities of both, textual scholars ultimately aim not only to evaluate “the effect of the technical history on the text itself” but also to combine such an approach with the critical work central to the humanities (7, 10). They demonstrate, in other words, how the text at hand always remains entangled with the historical, material, and social contexts of its production, transmission, and reception.

What does this approach look like in practice, however? Consider the following passage, from Jerome McGann’s “The Rationale of Hypertext,” as an example of such textual scholarship:

It has taken one hundred years for scholars to realize that a typographical edition of Dickinson's writings—whether of her poetry or even her letters—fundamentally misrepresents her literary work. A wholesale editorial reevaluation of Dickinson is now well under way. A particularly telling example appeared recently in an article by Jeanne Holland on the Dickinson poem "Alone and in a Circumstance" (J 1167). Holland's facsimile reprint of the poem shows a work structured in a close, even a dialectical, relation to its physical materials.

Dickinson set up a kind of gravitational field for her writing when she fixed an uncanceled three-cent stamp (with a locomotive design) to a sheet of paper and then wrote her poem in the space she had thus imaginatively created. Whatever this poem "means," the meaning has been visually designed—more in the manner of a painter or a graphic artist than in the manner of writers who are thinking of their language in semantic or—more generously—linguistic terms. ("Rationale")

McGann first stresses that the text, as a specific visual arrangement of disparate materials, matters. Indeed, any edition that erases the peculiarities of Dickinson's textual practices "fundamentally misrepresents her work." Then, he offers a facsimile reprint of "Alone and in a Circumstance" as evidence that examining such peculiarities matters a great deal.² Knowing that Dickinson assembled this poem with a "three-cent stamp," a "sheet of paper," and a "pen" allows us to know much more than any straightforward transcription would. McGann emphasizes that whatever meaning the poem has, it emerges from its visual design; the texts and the contexts of its composition remained intertwined and codependent. Critics may interpret "Alone and in a Circumstance," but any interpretation that fails to account for the social and material conditions

² See <http://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/emily-dickinson/16> for an image and transcription of this facsimile.

of its production misses a good deal. McGann's textual scholarship, and the textual scholarship that Greetham surveys, complicates those critical approaches that fail to account for such conditions.

A former student of McGann's at the University of Virginia, Kirschenbaum extends this premise when he suggests that we can never really disentangle writing from writing technologies. Yet *Track Changes* refrains from sweeping arguments about the history of word processing and its effects on writing. Writing and writing technologies remain related, but the latter does not exert some monolithic, deterministic influence over the former. Kirschenbaum writes that "the history I offer here thus largely and willfully resists generalizations and sweeping conclusions; it highlights instead the stories of individuals, it pays heed to the *difference* different tools and technologies actually make, and it reveals how the attitudes and assumptions can sometimes change over the span of even just a few years" (30). This literary history, in other words, does not provide a grand meta-narrative but presents individual narratives, delineates different technologies, clarifies their different effects, and historicizes changing "attitudes and assumptions." The evidence, in fact, seems to support this willful resistance to "generalizations and sweeping conclusions." Indeed, Kirschenbaum reveals both his own impulse to make such overarching claims and their own shortcomings: "Every impulse that I had to generalize about word processing—that it made books longer, that it made sentences shorter, that it made sentences longer, that it made authors more prolific—was seemingly countered by some equally compelling exemplar suggesting otherwise" (245). In *Track Changes*, technology affects writing but never universally. Different writers use different tools, and these different tools exist within the larger material and social contexts surrounding the writer and his or her writing—a host of conditions determines the size of a book or a sentence or the prolificness of an author. When

Kirschenbaum asks, “Was Nietzsche's well-documented embrace of the aphorism really a consequence of the Malling-Hansen Writing Ball, or of his deteriorating eyesight? Or both, or neither—as seems most likely—both in conjunction with myriad other factors?” it parodies any approach that pretends otherwise (243).

Kirchenbaum eschews any deterministic link between technology and meaning, but he does suggest that the history of word processing illuminates the complex nature of writing by demonstrating how it remains entangled with its material and social conditions. Drawing from Daniel Chandler and Christina Haas, he suggests that writing necessitates many interactions with and within the material world: “[It] is a medial process, characterized by the author’s relationship to an ever-expanding array of tools and surfaces. ‘Technologies cannot be experienced in isolation from each other, or from their social functions,’ is how Chandler puts it. ‘Our use even of a pen necessitates the complementary use of related technologies (such as ink and paper) no less than does our use of a word processor’” (29). Two points here are of particular importance. First, “the ever-expanding array of tools and surfaces” emphasizes how writing not only (and obviously) relies on “tools and surfaces,” but also how the “array of tools and surfaces” continuously increases. Therefore, writing entails navigating, surveying, and selecting: someone might use a MacBook and Google documents (as I do) or scissors, scotch tape, a copier, and many other tools (as Howe does in *That This* and *Debths*) to write. Second, writing remains a “medial process” regardless of media. As Kirschenbaum quotes Chandler, a pen “necessitates the complementary use of related technologies” as much as a computer. Or, put another way, the difference between my use of a MacBook and Google documents and Howe’s use of scissors, scotch tape, a copier, and many other tools remains a difference degree, not of kind. Though one approach inclines towards digital media and the other towards print media, they both rely on the

use of material writing technologies. There are no immaterial writing technologies for Kirschenbaum, Chandler, and Haas; the virtual space of the computer screen is material in its reliance on glass, light, silicon, and even the electrical grid.

This argument allows Kirschenbaum to orient his approach in *Track Changes* towards smaller, subtler examples that articulate the complex, mediated, and material aspects of word processing in particular and writing in general. “A literary history of word processing must therefore acknowledge not only the hybrid, heterogeneous nature of both individual persons and their personalities, but also the highly complex scene of writing (and rewriting) that we observe today, one where text morphs and twists through multiple media at nearly every stage of the composition and publication process,” he writes (30). Like “individual persons and personalities,” the “complex scene of writing” seems “hybrid” and “heterogeneous” here. The text that it produces, in fact, seems slightly unstable—in this passage’s alliterative phrasing, it “morphs and twists through multiple media.” To underscore this morphing and twisting, Kirschenbaum provides Neal Stephenson as an example. Stephenson describes how he composed his 3,000-page *Baroque Cycle* by drafting longhand manuscripts with “boutique fountain pens,” transforming those manuscripts into digital files with the text editor Emacs, typesetting those digital files with TeX, and, when his publisher wanted Quark files, writing a program in LISP to convert TeX files to Quark files. While this example seems both particularly conscious of writing technologies and far from the standard workflows of commercial publishers, it does serve a point. It not only emphasizes the morphing and twisting text of Kirschenbaum’s “complex scene of writing” but also expands our notion of what writing encompasses (30–31). It includes both a hand inscribing marks on paper with a pen and a deep knowledge of various software

programs and programming languages. Writing is not a simple, transparent act but a complex, meandering process full of different “tools and surfaces.”

The many small-scale examples of word processing practices—from Stephen King to John Updike, from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to Kamau Brathwaite—that populate *Track Changes* highlight the multitudinous effects that writing technologies have on writing. At the same time, however, these examples always return to the material and social realities of those effects.

Kirschenbaum ultimately turns this argument onto the practice of literary criticism and literary history. He stresses, for instance, that “our writing technologies do shape our thinking” (243).

Much like McGann, who suggests that any interpretation of a text that erases its material production misses much, Kirschenbaum implies that literary criticism needs to account for the materialities of writing technologies. *Track Changes* does just that: “The backbone of my argument has been a consideration of authorial labor in the production of writing, in conjunction with the material particulars of various technologies of writing” (243). Literary criticism and literary history can, in other words, examine “authorial labor” and “material particulars;” neither needs to separate the text from these two areas of inquiry. Doing so, in fact, seems increasingly impossible. Kirschenbaum argues, for instance, that archivists and scholars

will have to contend not just with the legacy of writing practices that can materially coexist in the tiny universe of an author’s study or on top of a writer’s desk (and desktop). Hard drives and floppy disks will no more erase literature or literary history than word processing itself will, but literary history and literary criticism also will change as new forms of bibliographic analysis and bibliographic information—perhaps too much information—become available. (245)

The already complex “scene of writing” seems poised to become more complex here. Shifting technologies will expand it, adding “hard drives,” “floppy disks,” and outmoded operating systems to the already present “legacy of writing practices.” Such an expansion, though, will always remain material; the challenge becomes how literary history and literary criticism will navigate the expansion. As Kirschenbaum demonstrates, writing is always more complicated than we imagine, always influenced by its material and social conditions. To offer a fuller understanding of the texts we read, literary history and literary criticism could demonstrate how those texts have emerged from complex, medial, social, and ultimately material processes.

Like Kirschenbaum, Drucker extends some of textual scholarship’s longstanding premises to argue against naive approaches to writing and the text. And, again like Kirschenbaum, she eschews any deterministic reading of the relationship between the meaning of a text and the material circumstances of its production. (She parodies such “reductive literalism” with her example of “Neuland plus Ezra Pound plus wide spacing equals fascism” [60].) Yet Drucker approaches this subject from another angle where writing is never ethereal. Indeed, she defines it in concrete terms as “any inscription, mark, sign, line, trace, or gesture capable of being held and differentiated in a material substrate so that it can perform a function, make a record, express or communicate ideas or information, feelings, thoughts, formulae, protocols, instructions and so on” (19). She grounds writing in its materiality here. Never imperceptible, it involves perceptible inscriptions, marks, signs, lines, traces, and gestures. Those characteristics, moreover, remain “held and differentiated in a material substrate,” suggesting not only that writing involves material actions but also that writing cannot exist outside of matter itself. Drucker, in this respect, disabuses us of any notions that writing is immaterial. Indeed, as she proclaims, “the idea of writing may generate a thick cloud of theoretical smoke, but writing

has a rich life in the material world” (20). Though we might consider writing through “thick” theoretical lenses, we should remember its concrete details—pens, pencils, paper, printing presses as much as keyboards, monitors, hard drives, and electronic bits of information. For Drucker, writing is never ethereal in part because all media remains material. “Electronic instruments are no less material in their operation and embodiment than print objects,” she notes (110). More interested in media materialities than the literary-historical significance of writing technologies, Drucker nevertheless emphasizes the material nature of writing itself.

Drucker also emphasizes the material nature of the text. In doing so, she again extends some of the basic premises of textual scholarship to highlight the connections between the text’s meaning and the contexts of its production. And again, she does so from a different angle than Kirschenbaum. For Drucker, the text constitutes a dynamic space, not a static one, where meaning arises from the interactions among its constituent elements. Such elements, though present, often recede from our view: “Typefaces, page size, headers, footers, and column width are among the obvious and apparently self-evident graphic features of textual work. Whether in print, paint, manuscript, or electronic and material formats, such features go largely unnoticed unless they interfere with reading or otherwise call attention to themselves” (59). So much comprises any text, yet we seldom acknowledge this. Design choices might rarely announce themselves, Drucker implies, but they are present across media. Thus, while “frequently unnoticed,” they nevertheless constitute an “important part of semantic meaning production” (63). Not only do these elements remain present within a text, they also contribute to a text’s meaning—meaning emerges, at least in part, from them. Drucker draws on the example of William Morris’s *Kelmscott Chaucer*, a nineteenth-century artist’s book, to articulate this

argument.³ This meticulously designed edition highlights how all the material elements that comprise any text contribute, in some way, to its meaning: “Every area of the pictorial scene carries a specific material reference value as the result of the way it is defined and demarcated within the page” (64). Nothing on “the page” seems static, inert, or neutral here. Instead, all elements (“every area” in Drucker’s language) interact with each other and demonstrate their “specific material reference” values. Such a realization prompts Drucker to reimagine the page—and, by extension, the text—itsself. “Think of the page as a force field, a set of tensions in relation, which assumes a form when intervened through the productive act of reading,” she writes (66). Never static, the text demonstrates its dynamism through the interplay of its parts and its dialogue with the reader. In Drucker’s view, if writing remains complex and material regardless of media, then the text (again regardless of media) presents itself as matter teeming with meaning produced through interaction.

If Howe’s later poetry exhibits a double movement between foregrounding the materiality of writing and of the text and reflecting on the nature of matter itself, textual scholarship and certain varieties of the digital humanities clarify much about the first part of such a movement. As Greetham explains, textual scholarship has long regarded process (the production, transmission, and reception of the text) to be as important as product (the text). We cannot, in fact, fully understand the latter without the former, as McGann articulates in his concise example of Emily Dickinson’s “Alone and in a Circumstance.” Kirschenbaum and Drucker, then, build on these basic premises and remind us that writing and the text remain more complex and more material than we might imagine. For Kirschenbaum, the development of word processing technologies in the late twentieth century highlights the heterogeneous nature of

³ The British Library has made a small number of images from this edition available at <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-kelmscott-chaucer>.

writing. *Track Changes*, moreover, demonstrates how the text remains entangled with the social and material conditions of its production, and it proposes a literary history and literary criticism sensitive to that entanglement. Drucker, meanwhile, suggests both that writing is never ethereal and that the text is never static. Instead, writing remains concrete (full of marks “held in material substrate”), while the text constitutes a dynamic space where meaning emerges from its constituent components. When viewed together, though, all of these related yet variegated approaches to writing and the text provide a critical framework for understanding why Howe emphasizes her production processes in interviews and alludes to them on the page. When we read, the materiality of the book (or journal, magazine, screen, et cetera) often seems to evanesce. Howe’s work resists this, and it calls attention to its own materiality as it so often attends to the nature of matter itself.

III. The Matter of New Materialism

By foregrounding the materiality of her writing and her texts, Howe attunes us to her own meditations on the nature of matter within those texts. These meditations do not portray matter as something inert, nor do they envision circumstances where active human subjects simply perceive passive nonhuman things. Instead, they collapse the divide between human and nonhuman and portray matter as vibrant. While this argument seems abstract, two examples (of many) can help unpack it. In *That This*, Howe reflects on the death of her husband, the philosopher Peter Hare. She recalls the morning of his death, at their home in Guilford, Connecticut, and the “oblong blue plastic throwaway sheath—protecting the early edition of *The New York Times*” in their driveway (32). This sheath is not some simple clump of matter awaiting Howe’s perception. Though a nonhuman thing, it nevertheless relates to humans and seems more ontologically similar to them than it might at first glance. It conducts Howe’s

recollection of Hare and channels Hare's importance to Howe and, in doing so, demonstrates some power itself. Meanwhile, in *Debths*, Howe declares, "A bell of the Chou dynasty is in my hands" (35). Though seemingly straightforward, this line again does not portray matter simply. Similar to the example from *That This*, a nonhuman thing relates to a human and seems closer to it than we might have previously imagined. By engendering a response from Howe—it and her relation to it become part of her poetry—the bell demonstrates a power that connects and is shared by human and nonhuman entities alike. Both of these examples are cursory, and I explore Howe's meditations on matter in greater depth later in this thesis, yet they hint at how *That This* and *Debths* often represent nonhuman things as relational, affective, and ultimately vibrant.

My use of the adjective "vibrant" here is deliberate. It echoes some of the arguments made by new materialist philosophy in general and by Jane Bennett in particular. I do not want to conflate Howe's poetry with such arguments, however. Instead, I want to examine how such arguments can provide a vocabulary for discussing, and a framework for understanding, her meditations on matter in *That This* and *Debths*. Where other critical perspectives might emphasize affect, perception, or context, a new materialist perspective homes in on things themselves without discounting these emphases. It considers the sheath, the bell, the writer, and myriad other entities on their own terms. Such a perspective arises, however, out of a larger contemporary nonhuman turn in the humanities. Put simply, this turn argues against the premise that the human remains the measure of all things, and it encompasses various and often contending methodologies and theories from speculative realism to object-oriented ontology. Within these contexts, new materialism remains an umbrella term for various critical methodologies that have rethought materialism over the past twenty years. Materialism in academia has long referred to either historical materialism (e.g. Marx) or body materialism (e.g.

Butler), but contemporary scholars like Karen Barad, Manuel DeLanda, and others have explored, challenged, and refashioned previous materialist, monist, and pragmatist traditions to offer alternatives. In doing so, they have also refashioned the difference between human and nonhuman. New materialists have argued that capacities we often view as uniquely human—e.g. feeling, suffering, remembering—might be capacities shared by all matter. Bennett’s work emerges from these contexts, and it proposes a “thing-power” materialism that sees human and nonhuman things not in separate ontological spheres, but in composition. Such compositions represent, in Bennett’s terms, assemblages where all things demonstrate and develop their power. If *That This* and *Debths* regard things as more than inert matter, then Bennett’s new materialism allows us to delve deeper into the details of these texts.

The nonhuman turn remains disparate and diverse, but a working group convened for the Modern Language Association’s 2018 convention has summarized it as scholarly inquiry both “obsessed with the nonhuman” and committed to reconfiguring the “standard divide between subject and object, agency and volition, person and thing” (*PMLA* 871). This same group, moreover, has identified numerous methodologies that comprise it. Because new materialism represents just one of these, it seems worthwhile to contextualize it a little further through short examinations of two others: speculative realism and object-oriented ontology. While both methodologies share with new materialism the impulse to decenter the human, they do so from different and sometimes contradictory angles. Steven Shaviro, for example, has argued that speculative realism arises from the increasingly unavoidable belief that we can no longer consider ourselves, as humans, unique (1). His speculative realism acknowledges both that nonhuman things exist independently of human perception (“realism”) and that, though ultimately beyond our understanding, we must imagine what such existence entails

(“speculative”). In *The Universe of Things*, Shaviro draws heavily on Alfred North Whitehead to suggest that speculative realism can correct the “bifurcation of nature”—the split between the world’s material reality and its phenomenal appearance—that has defined so many Western intellectual traditions. Indeed, speculative realism places all things on the same ontological plane where they exhibit the same capacity of “having-experience” (64). Regardless of whether we regard a thing as human or nonhuman, physical or phenomenal, it has experience and relates to other things in causal, perceptual, and many other mysterious ways (156).⁴ Where others had once divided nature, Shaviro unites it by reconceiving things and their existences. In this respect, speculative realism entails envisioning the hidden lives of things in order to affirm that we, as humans, do not occupy a privileged ontological place.

Meanwhile, object-oriented ontology (OOO) argues against philosophical hierarchies that privilege either the human or human consciousness. It instead argues for a flat ontological plane inhabited by objects alone. Or, as Timothy Morton exclaims in *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*, “there are only objects” (19). For the object-oriented ontologist, there exists no environment, nature, or matter—a critical difference between OOO and both speculative realism and new materialism—because such concepts become superfluous in a universe where everything emerges from objects. Thus, no top, bottom, or middle object exists, nor does the human subject exist despite human pretensions that would argue otherwise (*Realist Magic* 42–48, 62). Morton, as well as Graham Harman before him, always examines the entity itself and regards any system (e.g. nature), ground (e.g. matter), or privileged position (e.g. subject) with suspicion. OOO wants an unmediated examination of the object because it articulates a

⁴ Shaviro uses Whitehead’s term “prehension” to describe this process (29).

compelling realist worldview.⁵ Indeed, Morton remains fascinated with the object because he identifies an animating “rift” between its essence and appearance (*Realist Magic* 26). On one hand, the object always withdraws; that is, it limits what other entities can apprehend about it thereby rendering its essence unknowable. On the other hand, it also always relates to those entities, presenting its appearance in those relations. This tension, in Morton’s view, “vitalizes” the object and explains a worldview that reduces phenomena like causality and aesthetics to it. I mention speculative realism and object-oriented ontology not necessarily to provide counterpoints to new materialism, but to illustrate that inquiry into the nonhuman has become an important movement within the academy. Contemporary scholarship, in some respect, provides a surfeit of methodologies to examine nonhuman things.

While not monolithic, new materialism does cohere around some core principles. More specifically, the similarities between human and nonhuman matter and the power of things define much of the work associated with it. For Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, editors of *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, it represents a critical methodology that illuminates how all things remain more ontologically alike than we might imagine. These authors, in fact, quote Barad to “affirm that ‘matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns, and remembers’ because ‘feeling, conversing, suffering, desiring, yearning, and remembering are not singular capacities or characteristics of human consciousness’” (“What May”). Although this “notion of matter” seems anthropomorphic, it also collapses longstanding distinctions that we have drawn between human and nonhuman things. New materialism, in fact, pushes back against the many Western philosophical traditions that have elevated the human to the measure of all things. And

⁵ For object-oriented ontology in general and Morton in particular, neither naive realism nor eliminative materialism represent compelling realist worldviews. By claiming that humans have a transparent relationship with the world, the former seems untenable. Meanwhile, by suggesting that phenomena remain reducible to the material workings of the mind, the latter seems too scientific.

it argues against any subset of those traditions that have elevated “consciousness” as the transcendent aspect of being human. For Dolphijn and van der Tuin, those “capacities or characteristics” we might regard as “singular” or uniquely human present themselves in all matter. All things might feel, converse, suffer, desire, yearn, and remember because the difference between things remains one of degree not of kind. Nonhuman things demonstrate a power we might have otherwise disregarded, and new materialism thus emphasizes “action” as something shared across matter (“What May”). Such action never happens “in-between” things but “between” them; it is not, in other words, some elusive, evanescent, and immaterial force. Action arises from things; whether human or nonhuman, they remain vibrant.

These core principles ultimately become points of departure for new materialism. As Dolphijn and van der Tuin clarify, new materialism represents not only a set of ontological claims but also a critical practice. Certainly, new materialists “traverse” previous materialist, monist, and pragmatist traditions, weaving these disparate threads into something new, but they do so for concrete reasons. Indeed, when Dolphijn and van der Tuin regard new materialism as “an affirmation of the thinking process,” they emphasize action and envision it as a practice (“New Tradition”). More pointedly, they position it as “a practical philosophy” that those in the academy might use to address pertinent topics across disciplines. The two authors, for example, argue that new materialism “makes way for thinking metamorphoses regarding ... axes of social difference” like class, race, gender, and sexuality (“New Tradition”). It allows us, in other words, to rethink and transform how we discuss these common categories of “social difference.” At the same time, Dolphijn and van der Tuin suggest that this critical methodology might also transform scholarly considerations of artworks:

A new materialist perspective would be interested in finding out how the form of content (the material condition of the artwork) and the form of expression (the sensations as they come about) are being produced in one another ... In this way, new materialism is different from most post-Kantian studies of art, since in these studies, the material and discursive dimensions are treated separately. After a short description of the materials used following a “crude materialism,” the contemporary scholar influenced by the so-called “linguistic turn” proceeds to deconstruct its messages. New materialism allows for the study of the two dimensions in their entanglement: the experience of a piece of art is made up of matter and meaning. (“New Tradition”)

In this “new materialist perspective,” the forms of content and expression always remain entangled. We cannot separate the materiality of art from the sensations that arise from it, nor should we. Rather than divide the “material and discursive dimensions,” we should examine the two in conjunction. New materialism allows for this by asserting that “matter and meaning” comprise any artwork—or any book of poetry for the purposes of this thesis. Thus, it not only traverses previous materialist, monist, and pragmatist traditions to rethink materialism but also encourages new critical practices across disciplines.

Bennett operates within macro (the nonhuman turn) and micro (the new materialism) contexts, and her work offers the clearest vocabulary for discussing and framework for considering Howe’s meditations on matter. It does so primarily by espousing a “thing-power” materialism. In a 2004 article, “The Force of Things,” Bennett introduces this materialism as something that privileges neither economic conditions nor the human body, defining her project as an alternative to more established materialism derived from Marxism and queer theory. She instead proposes, in her words, a “speculative onto-story” that imagines what might arise from a

greater attention to nonhuman things (348, 349). To promote such attention, Bennett discusses four closely-related concepts. First, and most pertinent to this thesis, she introduces the assemblage as the arrangement of human and nonhuman materials and the means by which the former registers the vividness of the latter. Citing a scene from personal experience, where asphalt, a glove, a dead rat, a bottle, a cap, a stick, and a human comprise an affecting assemblage, Bennett argues that “*objects* appear more vividly as *things* ... as entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them” (351). Things, then, are never synonymous with our access to or knowledge of them. In fact, we remain in composition with them. Second, she defines self-organization as the power of nonhuman things to coalesce and persist through some shared force. Such a force courses through all matter, human and nonhuman, granting it vibrancy and vitality. Third, Bennett builds off her discussions of the assemblage by introducing the concept of conjunction whereby a thing’s power arises through its relations with other things. If the vividness of things becomes clear in assemblages, then this vividness emerges when one thing operates in conjunction with others (354). Fourth, she refers to “actancy” as the ability of a human or nonhuman thing to cohere, persist, and ultimately do something (355). For Bennett, human and nonhuman things become vivid in assemblages, demonstrate their power through some shared self-organizing force, build this power through their relations with other things, and then ultimately act.

If “The Force of Things” introduces Bennett’s “thing-power” materialism, then her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010) extends and elaborates upon it. Her discussion of the assemblage becomes much clearer here, especially as it relates to the power that things demonstrate:

Bodies enhance their power *in* or *as a heterogeneous assemblage*. What this suggests for the concept of *agency* is that the efficacy or effectivity to which that term has

traditionally referred becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized within a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts. The sentences of this book also emerged from the confederate agency of many striving macro- and microactants: from “my” memories, intentions, contentions, intestinal bacteria, eyeglasses, and blood sugar, as well as from the plastic computer keyboard, the bird song from the open window, or the air or particulates in the room, to name only a few participants. (23)

Things, in other words, may have some inherent power, but that power becomes apparent through an assemblage. Bennett’s “bodies” here “enhance” their power through either their relations with or by being comprised of other “heterogeneous” things. This, in turn, has implications for how we conceive agency. Whereas we might present agency as uniquely human, Bennett argues that agency remains “distributed” across many human and nonhuman things. We can, in her words, find agency across an “ontologically heterogeneous field”—that is, across an assemblage of “macro- and microactants.” She even turns this argument onto *Vibrant Matter* itself. Her sentences emerge from “the confederate agency” of many materials. Bennett, in fact, sees her text as the result not just of her thoughts but also of her body, her computer, and the sounds and substances swirling around her. (The allusion to the computer seems particularly evocative: a textual scholar like Greetham or McGann or a digital humanist like Kirschenbaum or Drucker would argue that, of course, any text emerges from the material contexts of its production.) Her articulation of the assemblage, therefore, represents the arrangement of human and nonhuman things and the means by which they demonstrate and enhance their vibrancy.

As Bennett delves deeper into the assemblage, this connection between it and the power of all things becomes stronger. She writes, for examples, that “assemblages are ad hoc groupings

of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts” (23). By emphasizing the “diverse elements” that comprise any assemblage, Bennett again underscores its heterogeneous nature. And, by likening those elements to “vibrant materials of all sorts,” she demonstrates how any assemblage contains and intensifies the power of things. Thus, human and nonhuman things both enter these “ad hoc groupings” and exist within them as “vibrant materials.” Assemblages might even exhibit too much vibrancy. As Bennett claims, these “living, throbbing confederations ... are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (23–24). The language here is striking. Assemblages “live” and “throb,” they teem with “persistent presence of energies,” and they seem contradictory, confusing, and “confounding.” Again, by presenting the assemblage in such fashion, Bennett intensifies its relationship with the power of things. Matter is vibrant, but we really understand that only through these “confederations” of matter. In the end, the assemblage leads Bennett back to human-nonhuman divide that her “thing-power” materialism refashions. It promotes, in her words, “a theory of action that crosses the human-nonhuman divide” (24). A confederation of human and nonhuman things, it demonstrates the power of those things as they enhance their power.

While such a “theory of action” might seem far-fetched, Bennett suggests that we reconsider such skepticism in the light of how little we know about human action. Indeed, she asks, “In the face of every analysis, human agency remains something of a mystery. If we do not know how it is that human agency operates, can we be so sure that the processes through which nonhumans make their mark is qualitatively different?” (34). If human agency remains mysterious, then why should we regard it as different in kind than nonhuman agency? Or, extrapolating further, if the human remains mysterious, then why should we assign it some ontologically superior status when compared with the nonhuman? Bennett questions such

impulses through her presentation of the assemblage in *Vibrant Matter*. Her new materialist perspective envisions all matter relating to, interacting with, and affecting other matter on a flatter ontological plane. We just need to look: “On close-enough inspection, the productive power that has engendered an effect will turn out to be a confederacy, and the human actants within it will themselves turn out to be confederations of tools, microbes, minerals, sounds, and other ‘foreign’ materialities” (36). If a “productive power” produces an “effect,” that power represents neither some immaterial force or something uniquely human. Instead, it represents a “confederacy” that contains human and nonhuman things alike. Within such confederacies, “human actants” are never singular entities but “confederations” of various “materialities” that we never conceive as human. Thus, the human becomes suffused with the nonhuman, and the stable distinction we might have drawn between the two becomes much blurrier. For Bennett, the assemblage foregrounds all of this.

Howe’s later work exhibits a double movement between foregrounding the materiality of the text and meditating on matter. Yet considering each part of that movement requires a vocabulary and a framework. If the thread of contemporary digital humanities influenced by textual scholarship allows us to grasp the first part, then Bennett’s new materialism, emerging from the contemporary fascination with nonhuman things, allows us to grasp the second part. Indeed, it both attunes us to the nonhuman things within Howe’s poetry and explains why references to an “oblong blue plastic throwaway sheath—protecting the early edition of *The New York Times*” and a “bell of the Chou dynasty” are not throwaway details. Such things remain more ontologically similar to us than we might imagine. In fact, they remain in composition with us through assemblages where they demonstrate and develop their “thing-power.” And such “thing-power” is never localized, homogeneous, or synonymous with humans but distributed,

heterogeneous, and shared across all matter. Viewed together, then, these vocabularies and frameworks—from the omnipresent relationship between a text’s meaning and the circumstances of its production to the affecting power of an assemblage—promote a reading of Howe where the text’s materiality and the text’s representations of matter always play off of each other.

IV. The Double Movements of *That This* and *Debths*

Michael Davidson claims that while every writer possesses “a materializing tendency,” we seldom see that tendency displayed in the text (93). It disappears as the writer, scholar, or publisher transforms messy manuscripts into (seemingly) finished products. What, then, can we make of Howe’s efforts to foreground her own materializing tendency in *That This* and *Debths*? Her word collages, page layout, and frequent gestures to the physical circumstances of writing and the text do not represent ends in and of themselves. They have larger implications. Other critics—like Davidson, Marjorie Perloff, and Elisa New to name three examples—argue that Howe’s attention to the physical features of her texts always accomplishes something concrete, such as recovering marginal or marginalized voices, reconceiving the lyric subject within a more experimental poetics, or highlighting the infrastructures that support the production of literature. I, too, agree with this general argument. At the same time, however, I want to examine the specific ways in which *That This* and *Debths* call attention to their materialities in order to make an ontological claim. Doing so requires examining, first, how each book demonstrates Howe’s materializing tendency and, second, how that tendency accentuates, amplifies, or articulates a claim about matter itself. *That This* includes many striking physical features from Howe’s well-known “collaged fragments” and blocks of verse to deliberately blank pages and photograms. As these lead us to reflect on the materiality of the text, Howe simultaneously reflects on the materials she has long associated with her recently deceased husband. Indeed, assemblages of

human and nonhuman conduct and channel these reflections. *Debths*, meanwhile, includes many of the same physical features as *That This*, and it too remains interested in assemblages of human and nonhuman things. Yet here these features lead us into meditations on how such assemblages mediate our temporal experiences. The poet, in fact, registers past, present, and future through her interactions with many material entities. While the impulses—to materialize, to examine matter—remain similar in Howe’s later work, they play out in distinctive manners in each book.

Davidson’s remark above, from his 1997 book *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry in the Material World*, naturally appears after he discusses Howe at length. Where other critics approach Howe through Language poetry and its rejection of the lyric subject (a clear and personal poetic voice), Davidson argues that we might be better suited attending the materialities of her texts (92). And he extends that argument to critique post-structuralist approaches to literature that elevate “signifying systems” above the forms—“the layering of physical documents and their institutional origins”—that support those systems (93). We might, in other words, adopt an approach that examines language and its materiality simultaneously. Thus when he suggests that Howe questions the self-knowledge of the female poet confronted by the male gaze, for example, he also claims that such questions occur “through textual practices that foreground the difficulty of reading. Since many of her lines physically overlap, leaving little room to read them, she calls attention to the physicality of the print medium and its presumed transparency to something more ‘real’ beyond the page” (79). Again, Howe complicates any division we might draw between her thematic concerns and her “textual practices.” Questions of gender remain, for Davidson, entangled with “the difficulty of reading” her work (*My Emily Dickinson* [1985] in this example) where “lines physically overlap” and obscure words, phrases, and paragraphs. Or when he suggests that *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* dramatizes a major

literature's erasure of a minor literature, he also suggests it does so by "violating normal typographic spacing," "jumbling" words, and calling attention to the print medium (86).

Davidson's work, in this respect, demonstrates that critical studies of Howe must always contend both with her materializing tendency and with what that tendency accomplishes.

Marjorie Perloff also distinguishes Howe from Language poetry while acknowledging, somewhat implicitly, Howe's material practices. For Perloff, if Language poetry complicates the lyric subject, and if Howe frequently employs autobiography in her poetry, perhaps we need to reexamine our approaches to both. As she argues, Howe herself appears "in the interstices of the text: 'Now draw a trajectory in imagination where logic and mathematics meet the materials of art. Canvas, paper, pencil, color, frame, title' (*FS*, p. 27). Right after this catalogue of artist's tools (where 'title' is the odd item) the cited overprint text becomes illegible, forcing the reader to become a kind of viewer/voyeur" (429). While this argument uncovers the lyric subject in Howe's *Frame Structures* (1996), it also highlights how difficult it remains for critics to separate thematic concerns from the materiality of her work. To make her point, Perloff quotes a passage whose words ("canvas, paper, pencil") and design ("cited overprint text becomes illegible") call attention to the medium. Although less interested than Davidson in the materiality of Howe's work, Perloff cannot avoid it. Another passage, near the end of her essay "Language Poetry and the Lyrical Subject," highlights this:

Add to such voices the visual devices—line placement, typography, page design—that characterize all four of the early books reprinted in *Frame Structures*, as well as the new preface, and you have a signature (quite literally a series of marks made on paper) as unique and "personal" as any we have in poetry today. What then of the purported death of the subject? (431)

As Perloff elaborates upon her argument—that *Frame Structures* does indeed feature a lyric subject—she returns to its material particulars. The “visual devices” of “line placement, typography, [and] page design” contribute to Howe’s personal “signature.” Even the choice of “signature,” and the parenthetical statement that follows, here suggests a critic attuned to the seemingly omnipresent interplay between the thematic concerns and materialities in her poetry.

Recent scholarship on Howe often takes this interplay as its point of departure. Elisa New, for example, suggests that the material features of *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007) demonstrates how the poetry itself remains connected to material infrastructures. As New writes,

Howe’s stylistic crossweave demonstrates [that] universities, intellectual communities, the professoriat, are not merely the settings in which minds operate, providing rooms for them to train limpid vision on objets d’art. Universities with their libraries and offices, their copiers and faxes, their sprawling neighborhoods of rental housing and substantial real estate, and not least their demographic instability and their transatlantic traffic, are part of the texture, entering the pure realm of ideas. (280)

Not only does Howe call attention to her medium through a “stylistic crossweave,” but such attention highlights the infrastructures from which that crossweave emerges. Her poetry does not erase the textures of intellectual communities—replete with libraries, offices, housing and their associated supplies—but foregrounds them. New demonstrates, once again, that critics of Howe cannot divide thematic concerns from material particulars, nor should they. I do not want to suggest, however, that all critical approaches to Howe remain the same. Indeed, Davidson, Perloff, and New all examine different books, display different interests, and ultimately present different arguments. Instead, I want to use this short survey of Howe scholarship to emphasize three particular points. First, nearly any critical approach to her work contends, either explicitly

or implicitly, with her material practices. Second, those material practices never represent ends in and of themselves but convey other themes within her work. Third, if we always contend with these material practices that accentuate, amplify, or articulate something in addition to themselves, we might want to understand what they convey about matter itself.

In “The Disappearance Approach,” the opening prose section of *That This*, Howe attunes us to the materiality of the text by detailing her archival research. A self-described “library cormorant,” she spends much of this section detailing her forays into the papers of Jonathan Edwards at the Beinecke (“Susan Howe’s Telepathy”). Naturally, she finds that archive materially rich:

The folio-size double leaves Jonathan, Sarah, and his ten tall sisters wrote were often homemade: hand-stitched from linen rags salvaged by women from worn out clothing. Grassroots out-of-tune steps and branches, quotations of psalms, dissonant scripture clusters, are pressed between coarse cardboard covers with frayed edges. The rag paper color has grown deeper and richer in some. One in particular, with a jacket he constructed from old newspapers then tied together at the center with string, looks like a paper model for a canoe. (22)

The Edwards papers here do not constitute some transparent medium into his, his wife’s, or his sisters’ thoughts. Composed of heterogeneous materials and content, from “linen rags” to “cardboard covers” and from “out-of-tune steps” to “dissonant scripture clusters,” they instead emerge from many different things. All of these different things never coalesce into one stable set of “folio-size double leaves,” but remain mutable, and they announce their materialities in their mutations. Some exhibit “rag paper” that “has grown deeper and richer” since the eighteenth century; another, constructed from “old newspaper” and “string,” seems to transform

into a paper “canoe” in front of the poet’s eyes. Though Howe favors seemingly straightforward prose and typographic conventions in “The Disappearance Approach,” she also asks her readers to envision texts that display, in Edward Allen’s phrase, a “knot of materials” (407).

This “knot,” Howe suggests, ultimately extends beyond the Edwards papers to the archive itself. Indeed, “The Disappearance Approach” simultaneously foregrounds the materiality of these eighteenth-century manuscripts and the infrastructures that contain them. She reproduces, for example, the following bibliographic information from a Beinecke finding aid (a document used by researchers to find archival materials): “GEN MSS 151, Box 24, Folder 1379. Hannah Edwards, Diary Fragment/ ca. 1739” (29). If Howe asks her readers to imagine the materially rich nature of the Edwards papers, she also reminds us to remember the materially rich nature of the boxes, folders, and libraries that contain them. This becomes clearer later, when she comments that “The Beinecke Rare Book Room and Manuscript Library, one of the largest buildings in the world devoted entirely to rare books and manuscripts, was constructed from Vermont marble and granite, bronze and glass during the early 1960s” (30). These are not arbitrary details. By listing the elements that comprise the Beinecke itself, Howe accentuates her earlier descriptions of the Edwards archive where the manuscripts emerge from diverse materials and change with time. The Beinecke, too, emerges from diverse materials (marble, granite, bronze, and glass) and a particular moment of time (the 1960s). Viewed together, these descriptions of the Edwards papers and the infrastructures that support them suggest that some creative interplay exists among these materially rich entities. As Howe reads a 1736 journal entry from Hannah Edwards, she remarks that “under the fan-cooled copy lights, she [Edwards] speaks to herself of the loneliness of being Narcissus” (31). By calling attention to the “fan-cooled copy lights,” Howe adds another layer to her discussions of the Edwards archive. Her experience here

becomes one where multiple materials—Hannah Edwards’s voice transposed onto paper, the Beinecke’s physical layout, and her own perceptions of both—interact and, through that interaction, produce an effect. This section of *That This*, though seemingly straightforward in its own visual design and material features, asks its readers to imagine those “knots” that comprise these eighteenth-century manuscripts and the twenty-first-century systems that support them.

As Howe’s “The Disappearance Approach” gestures towards the materially rich nature of the text by discussing her archival research, Howe also discusses her own writing processes to underscore this gesture. At one point, she reproduces an earlier poem of hers and claims, “I wrote this poem on a winter day in 1998 when my mother was still alive, and I hadn’t met Peter. I had been reading Xerox copies of the last journal pages from the microform edition of the manuscripts of Charles Sanders Peirce” (24). Such commentary, to borrow the vocabulary of textual scholarship, places process (the production, transmission, and reception of the text) and product (the text) on the same critical plane. Howe devotes space to the poem itself and the circumstances of its production—the winter day in 1998, her familial relations, and the Xerox- and microform-mediated texts she was reading. It also highlights Kirschenbaum’s argument that writing remains technologically mediated and, therefore, highly complex. If Howe’s composition process includes reading the manuscripts of Charles Sanders Peirce, then the allusions to “Xerox copies” and a “microform edition” demonstrate how texts twist through numerous media and, in doing so, inform the production of other texts. She also considers the production of “Frolic Architecture,” another section of *That This*: “Even the ‘invisible’ scotch tape I recently used when composing [it] leaves traces on paper when I run each original sheet through the Canon copier” (31). While Howe calls attention to the materially rich nature of other texts (the Edwards papers, a previous poem of hers) elsewhere in *That This*, here she calls attention to the

materiality of the text her reader holds. She finds “traces” within it. Writing this text was never, for Howe, an ethereal process but one that relied on materials as variegated as “scotch tape” and a “Canon copier.” Once again, although “The Disappearance Approach” adopts a straightforward visual design, it nevertheless attunes its readers to the physical complexity of the text by considering the archive, the infrastructures that support it, and ultimately Howe’s own writing processes.

The second section of *That This*, “Frolic Architecture,” however, calls attention to the materiality of writing and of the text in a more striking manner. It opens, for example, with a full-page photogram—an image made with light-sensitive paper but without a camera—from the artist James Welling (“Photogram”). By jumping from prose to image, Howe suggests that the text need not confine itself to standard or straightforward presentation. In fact, the opacity of Welling’s photogram (one of six included in “Frolic Architecture”) suggests that the text remains more textured than we might imagine. The light splotches that pockmark it, as well as the dark streaks that run down its right side, imbue the otherwise smooth surface of the page with a textural depth (see figure 1 and note that all figures appear in the Appendix). Whereas the page, in *That This*, might have previously seemed like a transparent medium for language, this first photogram suggests a new murkiness. Howe then jumps again, from the photogram to a four-line block of verse set in the middle of an otherwise nearly empty page:

That this book is a history of
a shadow that is a shadow of
me mystically one in another
Another another to subserve (39)

Here she intensifies the textural depth that Welling's photogram introduces. Opening this block with "That this book," obviously, alludes to the book's title and calls further attention to it as a material thing. At the same time, however, the verse that follows emphasizes that this material thing—like the Edwards papers, the Beinecke, earlier poems, or writing and the text generally—represents "a knot" of many material things. For Howe, *That This* becomes "a history of a shadow," and that shadow itself becomes "a shadow of / me." Her book does not represent some transparent window where her language maps clearly onto her thought. Rather, many entities—even those as seemingly immaterial as "a history" or "a shadow"—comprise *That This*. She adds, in other words, layer upon layer to her book. And by repeating "another / Another another," she accelerates this layering until the layers become multitudinous—many things comprise her text. If the standard design of "The Disappearance Approach" belie the textural depth of *That This*, then the opening pages of "Frolic Architecture" forcefully channels that depth.

These pages soon segue into the word collages—fragments of text, cut, copied, remixed, and reproduced—that constitute the bulk of "Frolic Architecture." While each collage, through its construction, calls attention to the materiality of writing and of the text, I only want to examine a few in detail here. On page 48, for example, Howe presents a collage that seems to include fragments from six different texts crashing into each other at odd angles (see figure 2). We can see the lines of the "'invisible' Scotch tape" mentioned in "The Disappearance Approach" running diagonally across the collage. These marks, therefore, foreground the material circumstances of the writing process and the text at hand. They call to mind not only the tape referenced earlier but also the Canon copier, the paper, and even Howe's hands constructing it in concert with these tools. The collage appears, moreover, as a block set in the middle of an otherwise empty page thereby evoking the four-line block of verse, set in similar fashion, that

begins “Frolic Architecture.” If that verse seems more ambiguous when compared to the prose of the preceding section, then this collage seems more ambiguous when compared to that verse. Howe, in this respect, adds to the textural depth of *That This* through all of her collages. Within this particular example, most of the words remain partially occluded yet some emerge from the confusion. Consider how “leaves in lower left,” “paper,” and “cloth” all appear somewhat, if not fully, visible. All of these fragments have some textual import: “leaves” refer to pages, “lower left” suggests page layout instructions, “paper” and “cloth” allude to two frequent materials used when printing books. Visual design and text combine here to remind us that the text we are reading remains one composed by and comprised of many material things. A similar example appears on page 81 where Howe employs the same approach—multiple texts crashing into each other, visible lines from the Scotch tape, collage centered with ample surrounding white space—to the same end (see figure 3). There, however, “covering the pages” emerges from clashing fragments to remind us again of the complex nature of writing and the text.

“Frolic Architecture” adds to the textural depth of *That This* in unexpected ways too. Throughout “The Disappearance Approach,” Howe calls attention to the materialities of writing and of the text by emphasizing common archival objects. At one point, in fact, she includes the bibliographic information from a Beinecke finding aid in her prose. Similar information appears in her word collages. On page 49, for example, while fragments from several distinct texts overlap, the semibold “Box 24 Folder 1377” appears clearly. On page 51, “1208 EF G 3 of 3 folders” emerges from a twisting-and-turning confusion of multiple texts. On page 54, “aper band/n.d. Folder 1376” runs vertically down the left side of that page’s collage. And, finally, on page 65 numerous folder numbers—1379, 151, 1379, 1713–1773—rise from a sharp line that otherwise cuts off the text. With each of these fragments, Howe echoes her suggestions in “The

Disappearance Approach” that a “knot of materials” comprise both the text and the infrastructures that support it. At the same time, however, these echoes remix those earlier suggestions. “Frolic Architecture” does not present this bibliographic information within a prose essay or through standard typographic conventions; instead, it presents them again but in a slant fashion. They pop out from clashing fragments or zig and zag through a collage. Where the earlier allusion to the manuscripts, boxes, and folders of the Beinecke attune us to various materialities, these later allusions intensify that feeling.

As striking as these word collages can appear, and as detailed as the prose reflections on writing, the text, and the archive can sound, Howe employs them to articulate an ontological claim. These stylistic, materializing choices remain only the first part of the double movement in her work. To paraphrase Davidson on Howe, they have implications that critics need to investigate; indeed, they occur alongside and entangled with other thematic considerations. Throughout *That This*, Howe approaches her deceased husband Peter Hare through the diverse entities she has long associated with him, herself included. Her presentation of these assemblages of human (Howe, Hare) and nonhuman (books, desks) things ultimately suggests that all matter exhibits some vibrancy. For example, the opening pages of “The Disappearance Approach” include a scene where a confederation of things demonstrates its power by channeling and conducting the poet’s memories of her husband:

Some paperwhites he loved to plant and bring to flower are thriving in our living room. Paperwhites are in the daffodil family so have their sweet spring scent ... On the computer screen I find a short essay he was writing on poetry and philosophy but never showed me. There’s a letter to his first wife’s brother, signed, “Peter and Sukey.” I wish

we were Hansel and Gretel with pebbles as a hedge against the day before and the day after. (14–15)

At first glance, this passage alludes to the materiality of writing and of the text like so many other passages in *That This*. Howe remarks on “the computer screen” and a signed letter; even the “paperwhites,” flowers from the daffodil family, suggest the white space of a book’s paper pages. At the same time, however, it articulates a greater point about matter. Indeed, the paperwhites, the computer, the letter, and Howe herself become an assemblage where the human registers the vividness of nonhuman things. The paperwhites here are not just visually alluring flowers, the computer is not a passive collection of plastic, glass, and silicon, and the letter is not a throwaway piece of paper. Instead, and in conjunction with Howe herself, they form a heterogeneous grouping of vibrant things that become more vibrant in that grouping. And they ultimately engender, in Bennett’s phrase, a “productive effect.” That effect becomes especially clear in this passage’s closing sentence where, with all of these entities channelling thoughts of the deceased Hare, Howe laments that she cannot return to some childlike state (“Hansel and Gretel”) and “hedge” against both past and future (“the day before and the day after”).

Other assemblages produce similar effects in *That This*, especially as Howe describes the details of her Guilford house. Later in “The Disappearance Approach,” for example, she turns her attention from a blue swatch from the wedding dress of Sarah Pierrepont, the wife of Jonathan Edwards, to the particularly affecting household scenes that followed Hare’s death:

Could it be an illusory correlation that causes my brain to repetitively connect this single swatch with the oblong royal blue plastic throwaway sheath—protecting the early edition of *The New York Times* as it lay on our driveway on the morning of January 3rd, and

again with the bright cyan book jacket on the complimentary copy of *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* that arrived for Peter in the mail a month later? (32)

Once again, this passage both calls attention to the materiality of writing and of the text—by mentioning a “single swatch” from the Edwards archive, the sheath that covers a newspaper, the jacket that covers a book—and articulates an ontological claim. Like the example above, the swatch, the sheath, and the book jacket do not represent inert pieces of matter but nonhuman entities that announce and enhance their vibrancies within an assemblage. Howe becomes part of this assemblage too, as her “brain” repetitively connects the swatch with both the sheath and the book jacket. This confederation ultimately engenders another productive effect where Howe cannot separate her research in the Edwards archive from the trauma associated with Hare’s death. The plaintive, questioning tone here demonstrates the manner in which one blurs into the other. While Howe considers that such an effect might constitute “an illusory correlation,” her presentation of the swatch, the sheath, the book jacket, and herself suggests otherwise. These things, in fact, coalesce into an assemblage that makes that correlation anything but illusory.

Similar assemblages appear—and produce distinctive effects—when Howe chronicles the details of Hare’s stately Buffalo, New York house. Consider, for example, her initial impressions of that place:

Old family oil portraits, various objects from the China Trade, engravings of genteel nineteenth-century Episcopalian ministers, and over the dining room table a painting of “The US Squadron Commanded by Comd. S. Rodgers sailing from Port Mahon. Respectfully dedicated to M. C. Perry Esq. of the U.S.N. by his most obt. Servant S. Cabrolla, Gibralta, 10 May 1826” in its solid wood frame beckoned me into an

environment where ancestors figured as tender grass springing out of the earth. They were saying, “Susan, child of our history, come home, come on in.” (16–17)

This passage articulates a history wherein Hare’s family contributes to and benefits from the longstanding commercial, religious, and military establishments of the United States. (It also exemplifies what Dan Chiasson has deemed Howe’s love of Yankee “material culture” [“Susan Howe’s Patchwork Poems”].) The “oil portraits,” remnants of “the China Trade,” engravings, and the imposing painting of a navy “Squadron” signify a lineage closely connected to American expansion and success. And while Howe feels enveloped by the environment created by this lineage, she never becomes fully part of it. Hare’s ancestors, in fact, call out to her as a “child of [their] history,” not as a child of her own. These things ultimately produce such an effect on Howe, but they do so both as signifiers of class and privilege and as affecting materials within an assemblage. Indeed, all of these things together “beckoned” Howe into this environment that remains both alluring and never fully hers.

Later, Howe finds another agglomeration of things that channels and conducts thoughts of her late husband. Considering Hare’s Buffalo house at greater length, she describes the following scene:

The room I loved most was the study upstairs. He rarely used it except as storage space for his many books. A large dilapidated desk that his father, a modernist architect, designed and constructed during the 1930s, was littered with old syllabi, letters and journals. A worn wall-to-wall carpet hushed the place and I had the same intense impression of the past pressing heavily on the present I often feel when I’m alone with books and papers. “I’ll go to him—I’ll find him,” I thought ... (18)

Like the earlier scenes drawn from the Guilford house, this scene simultaneously foregrounds the materiality of writing and of the text and meditates on the nature of matter. By turning to the study, Hare's "storage space for his many books," Howe again calls attention to the physical nature of the medium—writing produces texts, texts become books, books accumulate and impinge upon otherwise unused space. The "large dilapidated desk" also gestures towards this; it becomes both a materialized scene of writing and a repository of texts ("old syllabi, letters and journals"). Yet Howe joins the books, the desk, the papers that "litter" it, and even the "worn wall-to-wall carpet" in an affecting assemblage of human and nonhuman things here. Within that assemblage, moreover, all of these entities display and develop a power that ultimately creates an "intense impression of the past pressing heavily on the present." Indeed, they evoke memories of research libraries for Howe, and they encourage her to delve into the materials surrounding her in order to "go to" and "find" the deceased Hare. The nonhuman contents of this study are anything but passive.

Throughout *That This*, Howe's tendency to materialize and her reflections on matter interact with each other. Whether through prose, verse, or visual design, she frequently calls attention to the materiality of writing and of the text. Yet such calls are never ends in and of themselves. Rather, they accentuate Howe's own meditations on matter where human and nonhuman things coalesce and demonstrate and develop some power. Published in 2017, *Debths* has some similarities with *That This*. It also opens with a prose essay that explores the various materialities of a particular archive (Howe's own in this case). Many of the visual design techniques used in *That This* resurface in *Debths* too, from word collages to page layouts with generous margins and copious white space. Ultimately, these explorations and techniques help articulate the ontological claim that matter is neither passive nor inert, but vibrant. Where *That*

This approaches this claim through the deceased Hare, however, *Debths* approaches it through temporal experience. Or, more specifically, Howe’s sense of time—of past, present, and future—seems mediated by human and nonhuman things alike in this book. As such things coalesce into assemblages, and as they display and develop their power, they engender a productive effect that structures the poet’s own temporal experience.

Like *That This*, *Debths* features an opening prose section, “Foreword,” that adopts a straightforward visual design but nevertheless attunes us to the materiality of writing and of the text. Unlike that earlier book, however, this book does not accomplish that through examinations of the Edwards papers at the Beinecke. Rather, Howe delves into her own archive, and she examines the editions contained therein that resonate most with her. Consider, for example, the following passage:

I treasure my edition of *The Secret Languages of Ireland* by R.A. Stewart Macalister. It’s reprinted by Craobh Books (Armagh, 1997) and has a paper over board cover, a plain light blue jacket with text normally reserved for the inside flap in simple serif typeface, so the effect is both dryly pedagogical and rebellious. According to Macalister the work is based on a random collection of loose sheets, letters, manuscript notebooks, scraps of paper, dictionary slips ... *Secret Languages* is wonderfully littered with etymological particulars, diacritical characters, hieroglyphs, wordlists, oblique slashes. (21)

Here, writing never seems like something ethereal and the physicality of the text never disappears. Instead, the poet’s treasured edition of *The Secret Languages of Ireland* highlights the materialities of both process and product. Howe, in fact, mentions that the work emerges from “a random collection” of disparate materials—“loose sheets, letters, manuscript notebooks, scraps of paper, dictionary slips”—that Macalister assembles during the writing process. The

product that emerges, meanwhile, then seems to highlight the disparate materials that constitute it. More specifically, the poet admires the “paper over board,” “light blue jacket,” and “simple serif typeface” that form its external cover. She likewise admires its “wonderfully littered” internal pages full of uncommon visual features ranging from “etymological particulars” to “oblique slashes.” While Howe presents “Foreword” through lucid prose and straightforward design, she nevertheless delves into her archive and asks us to envision an edition that both emerges from and displays various materials.

Later, Howe expands upon this theme when she declares the type of edition that most appeals to her. “I enjoy facsimile editions,” she declares, “(such as the Cornell *New Poems: Manuscript Materials*) of poets whose manuscripts have a strong visual component” (22). Given Howe’s own poetic inclinations towards “a strong visual component,” this seems unsurprising. By declaring this so straightforwardly, however, she reminds us that her work contains many components and that we should not conflate her use of prose essay with her poetics as a whole. She continues, “What interests me most isn’t the photographed handwritten original on the even numbered side but the facing typographical transcription on the odd. These doggedly Quixotic efforts are a declaration of faith” (22). Again, Howe asks to envision an edition that emerges from and displays many materials here. She seems attracted to these facsimile editions, such as *New Poems: Manuscript Materials* that surveys the textual practices and works of W. B. Yeats, because of their clashing components. On one hand, the “photographed handwritten” originals of this edition underscore its materiality. Where “handwritten” highlights the physicality of writing, “photographed handwritten” then demonstrates how the text arises from and displays various materials like paper, ink, film, and light. On the other hand, the “typographical” transcriptions of these originals intrigue Howe in part because they add another layer to the edition. Producing

them seems both “doggedly Quixotic” and “declaration[s] of faith” because the originals remain both materially rich and mediated. Such transcriptions, in fact, might simply add to the complexity of the edition rather than reveal some truth about the originals. Howe seems, in this respect, as interested in the material circumstances of production as a textual scholar.

If “Foreword,” through its reflections on the treasured editions of Howe’s archive, primes us to think about the materialities of writing and of the text, so too do the word collages found in the later sections of *Debths*. Consider, for example, the two that appear on pages 48–49 (see figure 4). Thin streams of text—which Howe fashions from many diverse texts, their various typefaces, characters, and orientations clashing here—run through the centers of these pages. Nearly all of these streams remain illegible, except for two perched atop the others reading, “TANGIBLE THINGS.” The cut, copied, remixed, and reproduced qualities of these word collages call attention to the physical nature of both process and product. While writing always remains entangled with many materials, it seems doubly so for Howe and the wide spectrum of technologies used to produce these compositions. Similarly, while the text always remains a material entity, *Debths* employs “a strong visual component” that reminds us that it can never become something immaterial. The legibility here of “TANGIBLE THINGS,” though, intensifies these sentiments. Another example, from page 80, calls further attention to the materiality of writing and of the text while alluding to Howe’s earlier discussion of editions (see figure 5). A smaller word collage sits in the center of the page here, consisting of three different texts overlapping each other at odd angles. Unlike the “TANGIBLE THINGS” example above, most of the words (even those with strikethroughs) remain legible. Indeed, the collage begins clearly with “Coleridge”—the allusion to the Romantic poet evoking Howe’s enjoyment of

editions featuring manuscripts of poetry with strong visual components.⁶ Towards the bottom of this collage, meanwhile, the partially occluded “Spinoza’s face in the title-page” reflects back on the earlier discussion of editions and once again emphasizes the material nature of the medium. Howe’s poetry, in this respect, never allows us to forget that it emerges and contains diverse materials.

Even a puzzling fingerprint, appearing amidst these word collages, articulates this point. On page 58, it stands less than an inch from the left edge, vertically centered, partially occluded, and smudged (see figure 6). While it seems, at first glance, like an outlying feature of *Debths*, it nevertheless calls attention to the materiality of writing and of the text much like the prose and word collage examples above. The fingerprint, in fact, encourages us to envision the hands that crafted this edition. Working with various tools, they wrote *Debths* from and with everything from the *Secret Languages of Ireland* to a Canon copier. This fingerprint evokes a hand accidentally left on the surface of a copier as it scanned another document. It also evokes our own hands, turning the pages, changing their orientations to read the clashing copy of the word collages, and ultimately imprinting them with our own smudged fingerprints. We register, in other words, the physicality of both process and product here. Instead of puzzling outlier, then, this fingerprint reminds us both that writing emerges from and that a text contains many materials. Just as her discussions of the *Secret Languages of Ireland* and *New Poems: Manuscript Materials* or her word collages attune us to the materialities at play here, so too does this fingerprint. It becomes, in this respect, another “strong visual component” that heightens our awareness of both the writing of *Debths* and *Debths* as a physical text.

⁶ Coleridge’s manuscripts, while not necessarily visually oriented, display a script handwriting that nevertheless make them visually interesting. See <https://www.bl.uk/people/samuel-taylor-coleridge> for examples.

Yet all of these features account for only one part of Howe's double movement. Certainly, they all attune us to the materiality of writing and of the text, but that materializing tendency reinforces an implicit ontological claim in *Debths* about matter. That claim seems clearest in the second section of the edition, "Titian Air Vent," where Howe suggests that temporal experience arises when human and nonhuman things coalesce into assemblages and thereby demonstrate and develop their vibrant qualities. This section, which takes its title from a room at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, features short blocks of verse that shift between the poet's own sense of time and material things ("Inside and Underneath Words"). Already attuned to the materiality of writing and the text, we understand Howe's vision of matter more clearly in these passages. Consider, for example, the following lines:

I am here to slay the
dragon in the ready-made name of an earlier Susan. While
there is still time do you know anything about my watch
being stopped? Put your hand over my eyes and say I have
got it in my mind.

Ceramic, plaster, lacquer, newspaper (28)

Howe seems preoccupied with time: she alludes to "an earlier Susan" and asks about her "watch being stopped." The closing three lines, however, demonstrate how this sense of time arises from a grouping of disparate human and nonhuman things. Putting a hand "over [her] eyes" and saying that she has "it in [her] mind" both suggest a temporal experience mediated by such things. If the "it" refers to the stopped watch, then it, the hand, and the mind coalesce into an assemblage that prompts one to register time. Similarly, the closing line of "Ceramic, plaster, lacquer, newspaper" delves further into matter and thereby connects Howe's sense of time here

with these things. This list, in fact, suggests that temporal experience not only occurs within but emerges from a materially rich context.

Other examples from “Titian Air Vent” demonstrate how matter mediates Howe’s sense of past, present, and future, though they proceed in different directions. Consider the following passage:

Electric bulb

It’s a manic condition; barbaric conceptions of an “other self” sawing away our finite future as we approach the laws which govern clutter; leaving at death to return no more although fitfully visiting old haunts with the aid of metal, clay, guache, glass, glue (30)

The nonhuman things (“Electric bulb” and “metal, clay, guache, glass, glue”) that bookend this passage heighten our awareness of matter here. Thus, when Howe discusses “our finite future” or “fitfully visiting old haunts,” we sense that such temporal experiences do not arise solely from human cognition or perception but from human interaction with nonhuman entities. As we consider “our finite future,” in fact, “we approach the laws which govern clutter” further strengthening this connection. And, similarly, when “fitfully visiting old haunts” we do so “with the aid of metal, clay, guache, glass, glue.” For Howe, we register the past (the “old haunts”) not through ourselves alone but in conjunction with nonhuman things.

To conclude, I will return to a passage explored earlier, but in passing, in my discussion of Jane Bennett’s new materialism. It too occurs in “Titian Air Vent,” and it articulates both the connection between temporal experience and matter in *Debths* and Howe’s larger representation of matter itself:

Te turo turo

Running footsteps. Interlete te interlute. Ages have passed.

A bell of the Chou dynasty is in my hands. Goodbye for
the present. I seem to go back to things that do not belong
to me. Call when you get depressed. There are those of us
at a distance who may have seemed to drop out of touch but
never really did (35)

Again, Howe seems preoccupied with temporal experience. The nonsense phrases of “Te turo turo” and “Interlete te interlute,” combined with the “Running footsteps,” give this passage a rhythm that marks time as we read. Meanwhile, when Howe declares “Ages have passed” or “Goodbye for the present” she, too, marks time both by demarcating the past and demonstrating how quickly the present passes into it. That past, in fact, intrigues her. She returns to “things that do not belong” to her; she remembers that those “who may have seemed to drop out of touch” remain and, in this respect, become markers of the past themselves. When Howe comments, however, that “A bell of the Chou dynasty is in my hands” she suggests that a confederation of human and nonhuman things engenders these temporal experiences. Indeed, the bell and the hands, joined together in this assemblage, demonstrate and develop a power that channels these experiences. Where the bell’s age—the Chou dynasty dates roughly from the 12th century to 3rd century B.C.E.—produces thoughts of the past, the hands holding the bell personalize those thoughts. Both exhibit some immanent power to engender a productive effect, then, but both exhibit this power through their relationship with each other. Human and nonhuman entities coalesce to reveal that matter remains vibrant regardless of how we categorize it.

By examining Howe's efforts to foreground the materiality of her work, and by exploring the ontological claims made in that work, this thesis has used matter as its organizing principle. It thereby joins a growing chorus of contemporary critical voices that do the same across disciplines. Bill Brown has suggested that similar emphases on matter, things, and objects have not emerged in a vacuum. "It may be," he writes, "that scholars have turned their attention to the object world because our most precious object, the earth, seems to be dying" (13). Steven Shaviro, meanwhile, has argued, "The universe of things is not just available to us but increasingly unavoidable. The volcano is actual, here and now; we cannot expect to escape its eruption" (43). Such apocalyptic language underscores the environmental crisis that climate change poses in the twenty-first century. A dying earth, an erupting volcano—the severity of these phrases forces us to contemplate the material reality of the world we inhabit. At the same time, however, this language reaffirms that we have always inhabited a world rich in matter despite our efforts to dematerialize it. Howe's work always resists those efforts. *That This* and *Debths* demonstrate how seemingly simple acts—writing, reading, remembering—occur within the thickness of matter.

Appendix: Figures

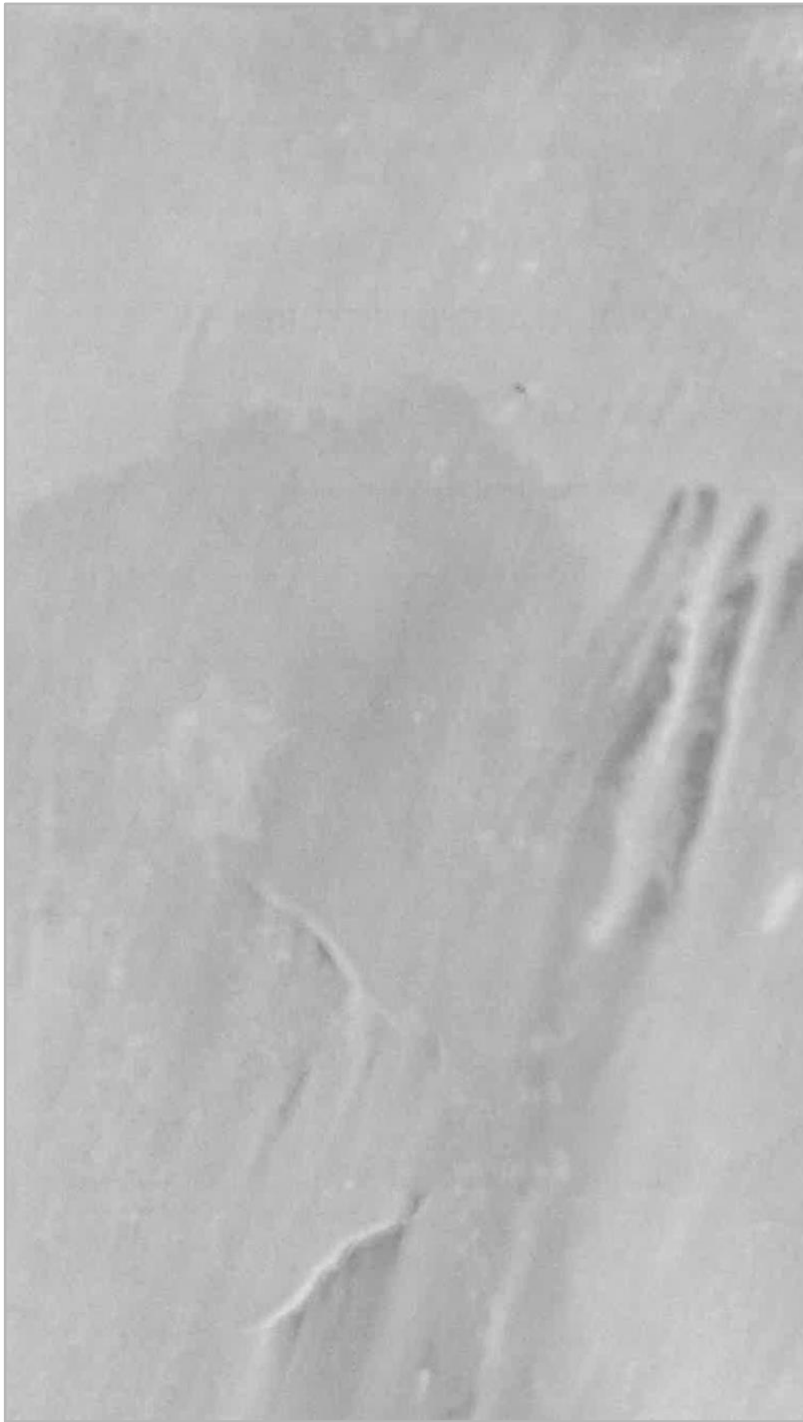


Figure 1. One of six photograms by James Welling included in *That This* (page 38).

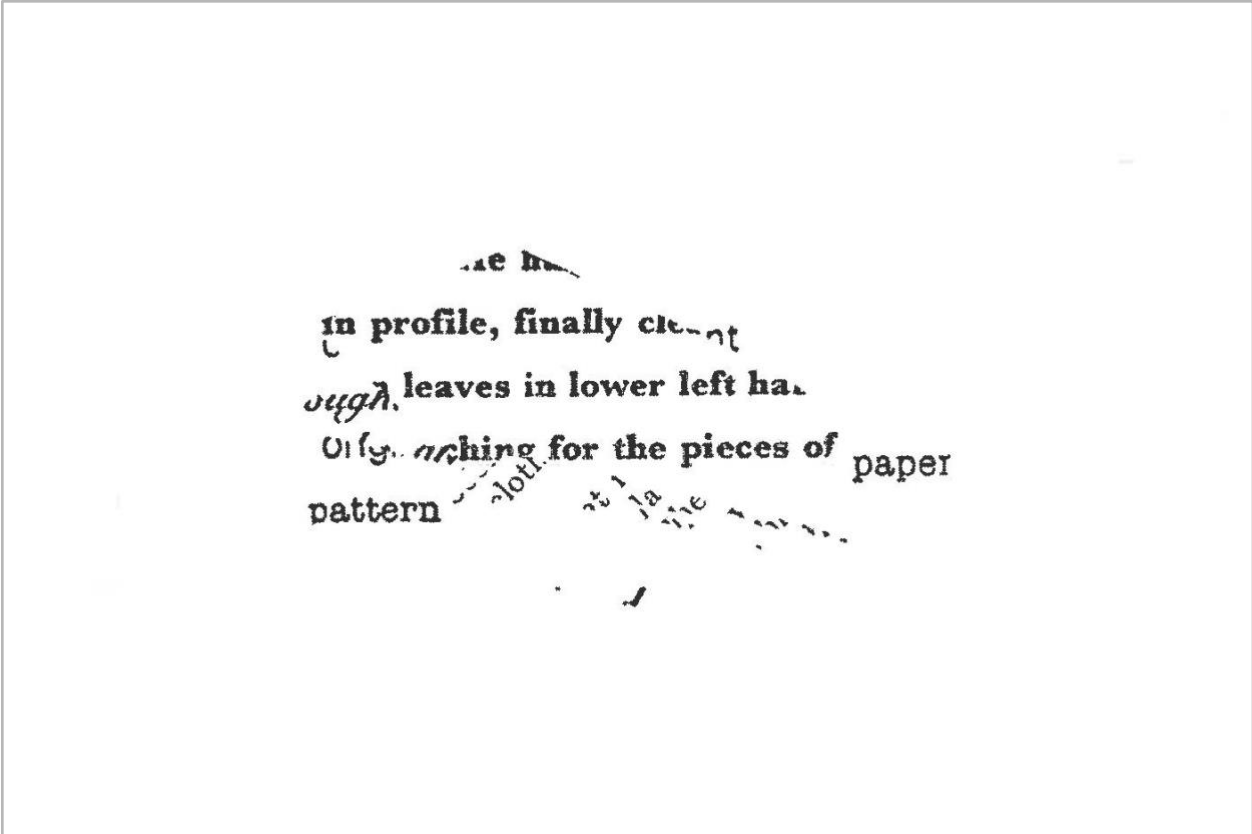


Figure 2. One of Howe's word collages from *That This* (page 48).

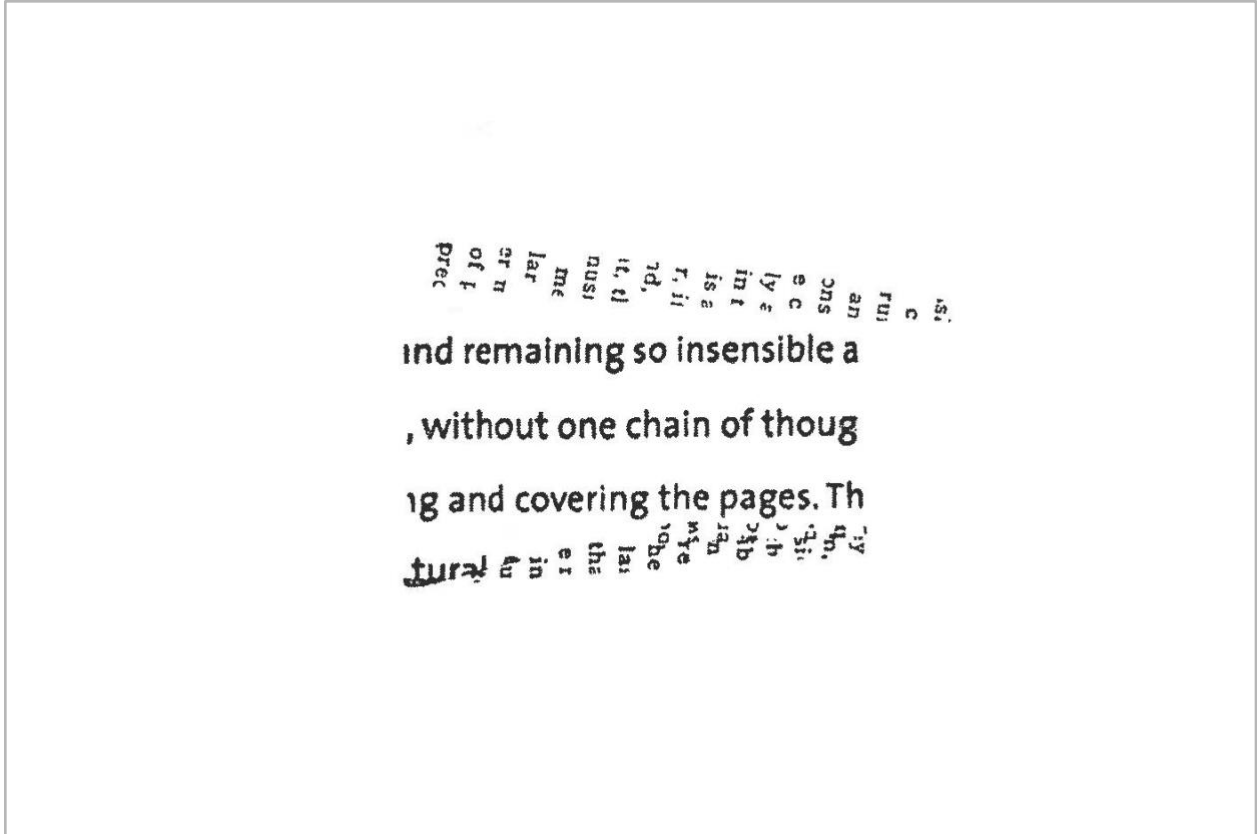


Figure 3. Another of Howe’s word collages from *That This* (page 81).

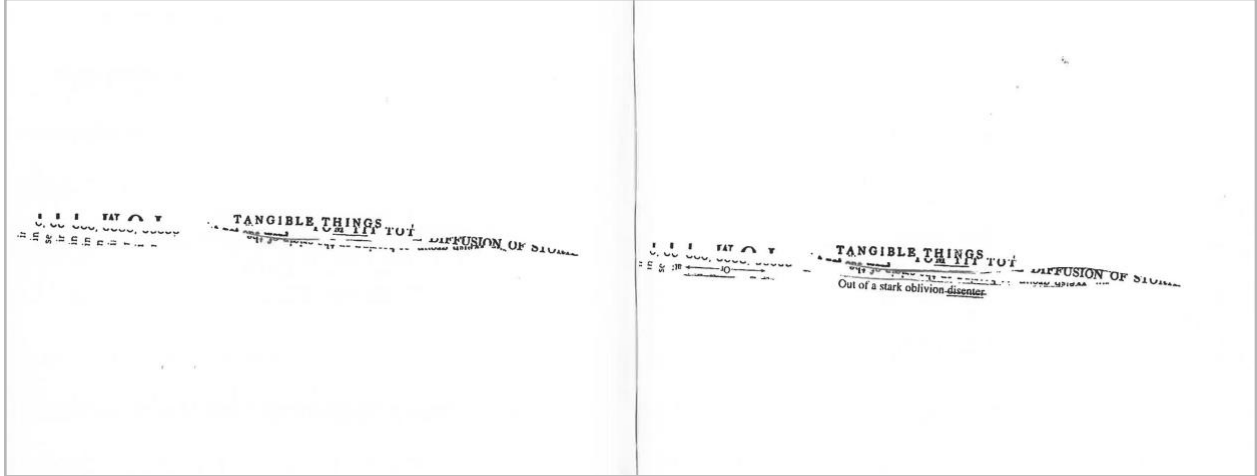


Figure 4. A two-page spread from *Debths* with “TANGIBLE THINGS” featured prominently in two of Howe’s word collages (pages 48–49).

Coleridge walked with me to
standing in the room he kisse.
'Almost forgets numan words' ~~he said~~
To out
Spinoza's face in the title-page.
To judge me ~~as~~

Figure 5. Another of Howe's word collages from *Debths* (page 80).

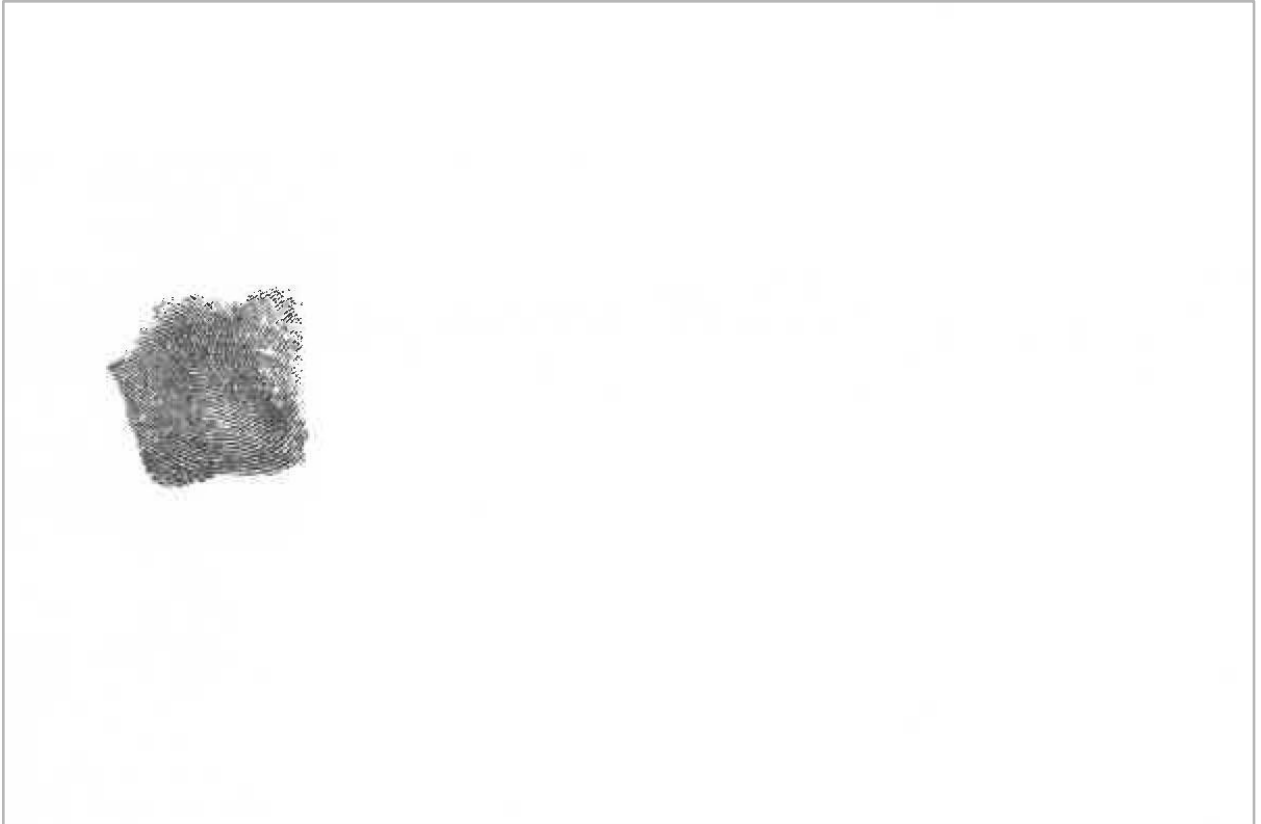


Figure 6. The cryptic fingerprint included in *Debths* (page 80).

Works Cited

- “215. Nonhuman Forms 1.” *PMLA*, vol. 132, no. 4, September 2017, p. 871. *MLA Journals*, <http://www.mlajournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1632/pmla.2017.132.4.868>.
- Allen, Edward. “‘Visible Earshot’: The Returning Voice of Susan Howe.” *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 4, December 2012, pp. 397–421. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43492423>.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke UP, 2010.
- . “The Force of Things.” *Political Theory*, vol. 32, no. 3, June 2004, pp. 347–372. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4148158>.
- Brown, Bill. *Other Things*. U of Chicago P, 2015.
- Chiasson, Dan. “Susan Howe’s Patchwork Poems.” *The New Yorker*, 7 August 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/08/07/susan-howes-patchwork-poems>.
- Creasy, Jonathan. “Susan Howe’s Telepathy.” *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, 20 January 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/susan-howes-telepathy/>.
- Davidson, Michael. *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World*. U of California P, 1997.
- Drucker, Johanna. *What Is?: Nine Epistemological Essays*. Cuneiform Press, 2013.
- Greetham, David C. *Textual Scholarship: An Introduction*. Routledge, 1994.
- Hammer, Langdon. “Inside & Underneath Words.” *The New York Review of Books*, 28 September 2017, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/09/28/susan-howe-inside-underneath-words/>.
- Howe, Susan. “An Open Field: Susan Howe in Conversation.” *Poets.org*, 7 September 2011, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/open-field-susan-howe-conversation>.
- . *Debths*. New Directions, 2017.
- . *Free Verse*. Interviewed by Jon Thompson, Winter 2005, https://english.chass.ncsu.edu/freeverse/Archives/Winter_2005/interviews/S_Howe.html.
- . Susan Howe Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
- . *That This*. New Directions, 2010.
- Kirschenbaum, Matthew. *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing*. Harvard UP, 2016.
- Latour, Bruno. “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications.” *Soziale Welt*, 47. Jahrg., H. 4, 1996, pp. 369–381. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40878163.pdf>.

McGann, Jerome. "The Rationale of Hypertext." *Electronic Text: Investigations in Method and Theory*, edited by Kathryn Sutherland. Clarendon Press, 1998.
<http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/public/jjm2f/rationale.html>.

Morton, Timothy. *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*. Open Humanities Press, 2013.

New, Elisa. "Upon a Peak in Beinecke: The Beauty of the Book in the Poetry of Susan Howe." *American Literature's Aesthetic Dimensions*, edited by Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby, Columbia UP, 2012. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/wein15616.16>.

Perloff, Marjorie. "Language Poetry and the Lyrical Subject: Ron Silliman's Albany, Susan Howe's Buffalo." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 25, no. 3, Spring 1999, pp. 405–434. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344185>.

"Photogram." *Merriam-Webster*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/photogram>.

Shaviro, Steven. *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*. U of Minnesota P, 2014.