Project Description

Objectives and Outcomes:

A Scholarly and Creative Activities Grant would enable me to complete the research and writing of the final three chapters of my monograph, *Salvage*. With one chapter forthcoming from the prestigious *Southwest Review*, another under review at *Biography*, and a third fully drafted, I am poised to finish the project and secure a publisher by the summer of 2012.

Generated by my scholarly research in material culture, historic preservation, and literary studies (including *Memory’s Daughters: The Material Culture of Remembrance in Eighteenth-Century America* [Cornell UP, 2004], which was nominated for seven book awards), *Salvage* resituates the aesthetic practices of “collecting” within contemporary conversations of “sustainability.” Because the essay genre, according to literary critic G. Douglas Atkins makes “the strange familiar” and “the familiar estranged,” *Salvage* introduces the less familiar practices of everyday salvage: organ transplantation, roadkill, bird nests, shipping-container housing, internet trolling, and Indian-giving. It considers how discarded objects experience a second life through what I call the “redemptive aesthetics of waste.”

*Salvage* is structured as an autobiographical bricolage. Coined by anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss as the “science of the concrete,” *bricolage* is an aesthetic mode of combining, reconstituting, and restaging cast-off objects. A type of *bricolage*, the familiar essay (from *essai*, meaning trial, balance, attempt) salvages the concrete material of everyday life, jutting it up against the unexpected to contemplate a larger question. Anchored by a central object placed in a new context, each essay in *Salvage*, then, speaks, as Levi-Strauss explained, “not only with things . . . but also through the medium of things.” They engage what cultural theorists call the “social life” or “biography” of things (i.e., Appadurai [2003], Gosden [1999]; Daston [1999], Kopytoff [1986]) and our personal attachments to them. “Tinkering with and recycling cultural givens” (to borrow a phrase from curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud), on the one hand, and attending to what essayist Philip Lopate terms “the changeableness and plasticity of human personality” through the “additive strategy” of the familiar essay, on the other, *Salvage* is a *bricolage* reflecting what characterizes as the relational aesthetics of everyday life (de Certeau [2002]). The unusual biographies together lend value to the useless, the disposable, the undesirable.

The first essay, “Atria” (another version, “Telltale Heart” is under review at *Biography*), recounts my five-year-old niece’s heart transplant in 2009. An ineffable form of recycling, organ transplantation salvages the living remains of a brain-dead person so another’s life can be redeemed. Framed by the paired medical techniques of cardiectomy and transplant, it explores the social life of human organs. Incorporated into Avery’s chest, an eight-year-old boy’s heart is part of an animate *bricolage* that upsets the boundaries between separate bodies and intimate, incorporated, though anonymous identities. “Atria” consequently explores the refuted phenomenon of chimerism, or the uncanny manifestation of a donor’s character in the unfamiliar recipient.

Fully drafted, “Bestiary” opens with my grandfather’s life as a butcher. He wasted nothing, creating edible cuts of meat and delicacies from the leftovers: blood sausage from stomachs, gelatin from hooves, terrine from brains. Moving to the American highway, the essay studies the uncanny carcasses of “roadkill.” A euphemism that skirts the violent reality of scattered, flattened, and unclassifiable bodies, roadkill has a curious afterlife as compost, cuisine, haute
couture, photography, and sculpture. Its second life obscures the abjection one experiences at the sight of rotting roadside carcasses, troubling the boundary that separates us from the animals they once were.

“Dimenticami” (forthcoming from The Southwest Review 96.1 [2011]) is shaped by the layered process of *pentimento*. A buried painting or sketch visibly emerging to a new composition’s surface, *pentimento* also means changing one’s mind. This essay explores three overlapping stories of forgetting (by Sigmund Freud, an Italian fire chief, and myself) inspired by Luca Signorelli’s newly restored frescos of the Apocalypse in Orvieto’s San Brizio Chapel, along with his life-sized rendition of Mary Magdalene in the Museo dell’ Opera del Duomo. Signorelli’s artwork thus maps an ahistorical point of return, a site of narrative recycling, suppression, and replacement.

“Troll” recounts the story of an autistic boy’s discovery of a diminutive troll—in actuality, a midget and Jehovah’s Witness—who is welcomed, fed, and barricaded in the boy’s closet for a single night. Relayed as a “true story” by my hairdresser, it is likely a new urban legend (possibly begun in Caldwell, TX) circulated on the internet since March/April of 2010. More than a mythological trickster, the modern troll is an internet provocateur, who posts deliberately false or offensive information that quickly spreads, morphs, and replicates instantaneous variants. The variants in “Troll” recycle outdated notions of disability as broken, deviant, or suspect. The essay, then, explores the closet culture of disability, redeeming the social outcast.

“Nest” studies the human detritus used as raw materials for urban bird nests. Chimney swifts, blue jays, and crows, to name a few, salvage and incorporate found objects into their nests—a peculiar *bricolage*—as protection from predators, seduction of mates, or pure ornamentation. The transformation of human garbage into temporary shelter by migrating birds in Texas strangely parallels the human migration on the U.S./Mexican border. “Nests” thus becomes a sustained meditation on provisional migrant housing made from industrial shipping containers in bordertown *colonias*. Recycled packaging of fluidly moving, consumable objects now strangely “contains” the unwanted, deportable, “refused” immigrants.

“Gift,” the final essay in the collection, begins with an early American relic box that I discovered in an overstuffed house museum ten years ago. Made of salvaged wood from mythologized locations (i.e., William Penn’s apocryphal treaty with the Shackamoxon Indians, Columbus’s house in Haiti, the tree in which Charles II presumably hid during the Interregnum), the box is an imperial *bricolage*. Because the snuffbox was one of many given as gifts to prominent Philadelphians from 1820 to 1830, this essay considers how the colonial gestures preserved by the wood ironically clash with the gift exchanged in its recycled form. More particularly, it marks the beginning of what has been derogatorily dubbed as “Indian giving,” or recuperating an unreciprocated gift. Switching registers to the Indian pawn shops dotting the landscape of Gallup, New Mexico, “Gift” resituates Indian-giving among “live” (stored) and “dead” (saleable) pawn that continues the barter of earlier trading posts—a sociable mode of recycling, where objects are switched, one for the other, without the exchange of currency.

**Significance:**

A collection of creative nonfiction essays, *Salvage* contributes to a range of disciplines in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. It expands the aesthetic limits of material culture studies (i.e., Prown & Haltman [2000], Stewart [1993], Turkle [2007]) to include garbage, extending anthropologist Michael Thompson’s 1979 *Rubbish Theory* to more recent critiques of *bricolage* (i.e., *Art Journal* [March 2008]). It joins debates in medical humanities and bioethics about post-
humanity (Marion [2002], Leder [2002], Sharp [2006]), while adding to the growing oeuvre of creative nonfiction on organ transplantation (Gutkind [1990], Starzl [1992] Silverstein [2007]). It engages in literary scholarship’s recent attention to “thing theory” (Bill Brown [2001, 2003]) and “affect studies” (Brennan [2004], Stewart [2007], Berlant [2004]). It addresses questions about animal rights and post-humanity (Oliver [2009], Derrida [2008], Harroway [2007]). It examines the human stigma of being disposable, despised and useless, specifically immigrants (Nazario [2007]), Papanek [2005] and the disabled (Couer [2009], Davidson [2008], Siebers [2008]). Finally, it tests new formulations of “gifting” by anthropologists and philosophers (The Question of the Gift Across the Disciplines, ed. Mark Osteen [Routledge, 2002]).

Exploring the pressing questions of sustainability through creative nonfiction, Salvage also speaks to an informed reading public beyond academia. At a time when the value and pertinence of the academy in general and the humanities in particular is being scrutinized, my project offers a bridge to this presumed cultural gap.

**External Support:**
I have applied for a Howard Foundation Grant, Brown University ($25,000) and will be applying in 2011 for the following: National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship ($4,200/month for up to 12 months), Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Residency Fellowship (one-month residency in Italy), and the Winterthur Museum Fellowship ($1,500).