The "Stuff" of Archives

Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives

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The idea of an archive has gone beyond a repository or storage of information and documents or a legitimizing instrument of power structures and prevailing authorities. In recent years, feminist scholars have suggested that the archive is a space for dwelling and a quotidian site for marginalized subjects as well as gendered and erotically charged energies, meanings, and other bodily processes.[1] Following and extending these ideas, this essay seeks to establish a capacious notion of the archive by locating the quotidian within the messy physical, symbolic, and emotional arrangements of objects, bodies, and spaces in queer immigrant lives. This essay looks at such "disarrangements" that have been devised by undocumented queer immigrants' households in New York City. Using ethnographic fieldwork and buoyed by writings in affect theory and material culture studies, this essay aspires to understand how seemingly hoarder-like household material, symbolic, and emotional conditions are arenas for creation of a queer immigrant archive that enables the contestations of citizenship, hygiene, and the social order.

By foregrounding the un-HGTV dwellings of several undocumented queer households,[2] this theoretical and ethnographic exploration seeks to expand the idea of archive by departing from the planned coherent borders of the "archival" and deploying a sustained focus on the seemingly trashy, dirty, disgusting, and untidy disorganization of bodies, things, and emotions. In other words, this essay suggests that mess, clutter, and muddled entanglements are the "stuff" of queerness, historical memory, aberrant desires, and the archive. Archives, therefore, are constituted

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by these atmospheric states of material and affective disarray and the narratives spun from them. As such, this essay maps these queer immigrant households as archives to showcase the vexed relationships between and among objects, bodies, narratives, and desires.

To lay the groundwork for the argument, I offer an abbreviated and focused thick description of a queer household, emphasizing the narratives about one domicile as a way to "orient" or ground the succeeding discussion and analysis. This ethnographic section is deployed as an instantiation of the idea of "archiving otherwise," or a queer take on "dwelling in the archives," as the quotidian becomes the fuel for animating capacious engagements with queer undocumented immigrants as "impossible subjects" of history.[3]

The Story of an Apartment: Objects, Bodies, Documents

Since 1989, I have conducted fieldwork among Asian queer immigrants in New York City. Since 2004, my ethnographic forays have included Latino and African American queers. For this essay, I concentrate on my observations of a group of undocumented Asian and Latino queer immigrants who live in several households in Jackson Heights, a neighborhood in Queens. As a gentrifying neighborhood, Jackson Heights has transitioned from a predominantly Jewish and Italian enclave to a mostly mixed post-1965 immigrant community of Latinos (particularly Ecuadorians, Peruvians, and Colombians), Central Americans, and Asians (Koreans, Chinese, Filipinos, and South Asians—Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Afghans) in the late twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, the signs of urban renewal have set in with the coming of nonimmigrant white-collar professionals finding refuge in the area's lower rentals and real estate costs. This dramatic shift is the backdrop of the stories that I relay below.[4]

Considering the constraints of this work, I discuss only one household in particular. This household consists of six immigrants and includes a Filipina trans woman, two South Asian gay men, an Ecuadorian lesbian, and two Colombians, a lesbian and a "bisexual" man. I use the sexual identity categories loosely and provisionally, as these immigrants deploy them rather ambivalently and oftentimes in contradictory ways. The residents are a motley crew of working-class immigrants. They work in various service jobs, selling clothes, busing tables, doing occasional sex work, dressmaking, cooking in an ethnic restaurant, and other part-time and seasonal employment. Each one of them has to cobble together two to four jobs to barely survive and to be able to send money to their families back home. The household members are rarely together in the apartment because of their erratic and divergent work schedules. Part of the reason I focus on this household is that it was the only one among five households whose members were able to maintain their living arrangement for more than a few months, and, more importantly, these six queers were more forthcoming and generous in sharing their lives with me. Hav-

ing said that, I do not claim the same level of intimacy with all of them on the same range of topics. Hence for this essay I focus more on detailed conversations with a couple of the residents. I first encountered this household through Imelda, the Filipina trans woman.[5] She was the common denominator in the household—everyone knew her, and she was the catalyst for forging this household arrangement. We have known each other casually since the nineties, since we have friends in common. I unexpectedly ran into her in a coffee shop in Jackson Heights on a cold spring day in 2003. She looked rather worried as she held a piece of paper in her hand. When I asked her what the problem was, she replied that she was worried about this form that came in the mail. It was a federal census form that was asking for information regarding her household. When I asked her why an innocuous document such as the census questionnaire would upset her, she said that she was afraid that if she did not respond or if she answered the form truthfully, she would get into trouble. I tried to reassure her that her fears were unfounded and that the document was harmless. She then told me that she was worried because, as an undocumented immigrant, any federal paperwork is a cause for concern. Additionally, she confided that she did not live alone but resided with five other queers who were also undocumented. They lived in a one-bedroom apartment, which she suspected violated several city housing ordinances despite their landlord having turned a blind eye toward this arrangement. Imelda fretted that their living conditions and immigration status might open them up to scrutiny, eventual prosecution, and maybe deportation. After folding the document and finishing her coffee, she invited me to visit her apartment.

The apartment was several blocks from Roosevelt Avenue (the neighborhood's main thoroughfare) and was on the first floor of a three-unit brick apartment building. When I first entered Imelda's apartment, my initial reaction was that of disgust and shock. I was appalled at the conditions of the domicile, where cramped uncomfortable quarters were the (dis)order of the day. My visceral reaction to the apartment was similar to reactions of people when they enter the homes of hoarders.

The apartment was like a haggard old person, weighed down by the burdens of things and lives. It was dimly lit and somewhat dusty in some corners and, from my own perspective, dismal all over. The living room and bedroom, if one were to demarcate these spaces as such, were filled with plastic bags and carton boxes, mostly neatly piled in every available place. With the lack of spatial symmetry and functional clarity, the home seemed to reek of confusion and of the smell of intense human intimacy. Imelda noticed my reaction right away and immediately pointed out that while to any visitor the apartment seemed to have no sense of order, each of the six residents had sequestered a portion or corner and placed their belongings in it. It is not just a jumble of things, she countered. Each of the six residents knew where their possessions belonged. Sleeping arrangements were makeshift—typically a small mattress or pile of blankets on the floor or over boxes and other

containers. The kitchen was really a sink, refrigerator, and gas stove lined up on one side of the living or main room.

When I first visited the apartment, only one other person was there, Natalia, the Colombian woman. Imelda and Natalia both told me that each of the six residents worked three or more jobs, and their schedules were so erratic that it was very rare that all of them were in the apartment at one time. They seemed to have created an everyday rhythm that was acceptable and enabled them to survive as they pooled their meager incomes to pay for the rent.

Impossible Lives: Queerness and Mess

Having given a brief background or context of the household and the neighborhood, two questions remain: What makes this household queer other than the fact that the six immigrants sexually identified as transgender, bisexual, gay, or lesbian? Furthermore, what makes this household an archive? At the heart of my discussion and analysis is the pivotal idea of mess as constitutive of queerness and of a queer immigrant archive.

This household of six queer undocumented immigrants, whom I have through the years affectionately nicknamed "the Queer Six," inhabits a queer space of waywardness in terms of its physical, affective, and social arrangements. *Messy* or *mess* is the word that pejoratively describes this particular immigrant household, but I would argue that *mess* is a word that can creatively illuminate the idea of queerness in general and queer archives in particular. My assertion of *queer* and *queering* as *mess* and *messing up* comes out of a critical reading of queer theory, popular culture, vernacular language, and everyday life. My use of *queer* and *mess* is not limited to bodies, objects, and desires but also relates to processes, behaviors, and situations. "Queering" and "messing up" are activities and actions as much as "queer" and "mess" can be about states/status, positions, identities, and orientations. These various formulations of queer and mess are not independent of each other and are relevant to my discussion below. While people may balk at the idea of mess as "constituting" queer, it is precisely the discomfort elicited and provoked by the idea and realities of mess that is at the heart my formulation and provocation.

The idea of queer as mess takes off from the initial impetus that propelled the contemporary reappropriation of *queer*. Michael Warner has famously likened the project of queer theory to a sensorial morass by creating a funky atmosphere in an otherwise staid academia and making it stink of sexual rut.[6] Such a messing-up mission reverberates in the kinds of queer scholarship that focus on the recognition and centering of underrecognized practices, stances, and situations that deviate from, resist, or run counter to the workings of normality. Far from romanticizing deviance and oppositionality, I intend to locate discomfort, dissonance, and disorder as necessary and grounded experiences in the queer everyday and not as heroic

acts of exceptional people. In other words, while mainstream queer studies scholarship has valorized dissident dimensions of disorder, my deployment of mess is about funking up queerness in a way that retains the mundane, banal, and ordinariness of queer experience and its mercurial often intractable qualities.

Queer as mess also takes its inspiration from reality television, particularly makeover shows. For example, *What Not to Wear* is a show that purports to ambush unsuspecting "fashion victims" and transform them into chic fashionistas. *Hoarders: Buried Alive* is a different kind of intervention show that seeks to literally and metaphorically clean up the lives of hoarders who inhabit crowded and decrepit abodes. In both shows, the stories revolve around the narrative of normalization. In the fashion makeover TV series, the hosts literally take women who either dress too "butch" or masculine or look "slutty" in their everyday garb and reform them into proper female/feminine subjects. Similarly, the hoarder show is a lesson in proper domesticity and the ways that normative value is held as the key to propelling the movement from pathology to normality.

The Queer Six are not hoarders in any sort of way. I take more than a visceral interest in the *Hoarders* show because it provides indirect yet vital lessons about queer immigrant archives. To equate the analogy between hoarders and these queer immigrants to one of simple correspondence would be too cavalier and irresponsible. Hoarding carries particular cultural and psychological baggage. I do not intend to place the Queer Six in a category that is always already pathologized. Rather, I juxtapose the queer immigrant and the hoarder in meaningful tension in relation to each other.

To go a bit deeper into the reality show, the story of every *Hoarders* episode almost always starts at the point of impossibility and untenability. This impossibility is founded on material conditions that persist in the chaotic, dirty, trashy, disgusting, and crowded living conditions of a hoarder. The typical *Hoarders* plot begins with a friend or relative visiting the hoarder's home and then in an almost scripted horror-filled manner exclaiming, "How can you [the hoarder] live like this?" This moment of impossibility becomes the catalyst for a planned intervention by a makeover crew that includes a mental health or social worker, a professional organizer, and a team of cleaners and movers. The impossibility of mess, in my view, is not the turning point to normality but is in fact the very stuff of queerness.[7] Mess is not pathology but rather a productive orientation toward bodies, objects, and ideas that do not toe the line of hygiene, "practicality" or functionality, value, and proper space/time coordination.[8]

In several episodes of the show, hoarders are often asked to assess their sense of value by pointing to their erratic (deemed unacceptable) ideas about which objects are valuable and need to be kept for posterity and which are trash and should be thrown away. The show argues that the capacity to determine normative value, or, more accurately, the very idea of normative value, is lacking in the hoarder's life

and is something he or she should learn as part of the therapeutic cleanup. The bifurcation between value-filled/treasures or valueless/trash creates not only binaries but also teleologies of value. The movement from pathology to normality, from impossibility to tenability, from mess to order can also be portrayed in terms of the teleological routes of value.[9]

The ethnographic observations I offer below engage with and refuse such routes of value. Moreover, these refusals also emphasize the dynamic role of mess in social life. Part of these observations can be gleaned in the vernacular and quotidian use of mess. "So-and-so is a hot mess!" is a statement that most readers might easily categorize as pejorative. However, popular culture blurs the lines between pathetic, tragic, and sorry states of mess and ones that are admirable, sexy, and attractive. Consider the rather slippery and erratic judgments of entertainment figures such as Amanda Bynes, Lindsay Lohan, and Britney Spears and how such judgments are never static but are in fact mobile in their ascriptions of attractiveness and repulsion, between fabulous disasters and just plain tragic cases. Oftentimes, the idea of a "hot mess" involves less a clear-cut binary than a highly gendered one, but it interestingly occupies a frictive dimension that runs simultaneously within crisscrossing grids of "positive" and "negative" messes.

Apart from popular culture, other alternative but equally compatible ways of looking at mess are through the lenses of the science of systems management and critical social science research methodology. In these two bodies of literature, mess is seen not as aberrant but rather as constitutive of social realities and systems. Recent literature on the management of systemic crises, especially that which seeks to administer complex circuits of process and relationships like urban transport and emergency/disaster services, trenchantly proposes that messes should be considered not as always already bad or negative but rather as an intrinsic part of typical expectations built into the structure.[10] Social science research methodology is another set of lenses that have strongly reconsidered mess as an integral part of understanding social phenomena. John Law submits that instead of creating neat analytical categories and routine regularities, social researchers should look to mess and messiness as a way to more accurately and sensitively portray everyday social interactions and institutions.[11]

Overall, mess provides a vibrant analytical frame and a visceral phenomenological grip on the exigencies of marginalized queers—especially those who do not occupy the valorized homonormative spaces of the contemporary West. Mess, as I demonstrate with a brief ethnographic vignette below, is a route for funking up and mobilizing new understandings of stories, values, objects, and space/time arrangements. As such, mess is a way into a queering of the archive that involves not a cleaning up but rather a spoiling and cluttering of the neat normative configurations and patterns that seek to calcify lives and experiences.

Discards, Dishes, and Impossible Domesticity

The story of the Queer Six involves many episodes of quotidian struggles and moments of hilarious interactions. While scholars might just want to render these queers as people living threadbare lives, I aim to give flesh to their experiences and mobilize more than just a concatenation of zombie-like or already-dead routines. Relegating impossible messy subjects such as hoarders and undocumented immigrants into the realm of the dead/undead is very easy. For example, the hoarder show is subtitled *Buried Alive*, and recent scholarship has likened marginalized subjects as inhabiting a space of death using Achille Mbembe and Giorgio Agamben as the pallbearers of contemporary life. I intend to refrain from these necropolitical/necrophilic accounts and instead focus on the "aliveness" of these queers in terms of their encounters with other bodies and objects. As such, I highlight moments of insignificance and illegibility that I hope will give rise to a more luminous account of queer immigrant lives. Mess, therefore, is not always about misery, complete desolation, and abandonment but can also gesture to moments of vitality, pleasure, and fabulousness.[12]

This vignette begins and ends with dishes—implements for food, not objects of sexual desire but of other kinds of desires and aspirations. Natalia, one of the Queer Six, found a stack of dishes and bowls on the curb, around the corner from the apartment. Such finds are not unusual since the streets are typical sites where various city households dispose of discards and refuse. The dishes and bowls were made of melamine, which is used in the manufacturing of dining utensils and occupies a middle ground between china/porcelain and plastic. It has a shiny, slightly heavier feel than plastic and is quite inexpensive. Natalia's find consisted of a set of seven dishes and four bowls, decorated with blue leaves. The dishes and bowls must have been used for a long time since some of the decoration was faded or chipped.

When Natalia took out her scavenged "treasures," Imelda squealed with delight. "Oh my, beautiful dinnerware." Then both women looked at each other and almost simultaneously said, "Someday." When I asked them what they meant, the women admitted that no one ever really eats regularly at home. Because of the congested apartment and their own fear of having rats and cockroaches, they did not have any communal meals. Cooking was kept to reheating food bought from one of several ethnic restaurants in the neighborhood. Meals were limited to eating out of plastic or take-out containers, mostly alone or with another roommate.

Natalia's treasure of melamine dishes and bowls soon found its way to one of her Rubbermaid containers piled rather haphazardly in her corner of the living room. But before these implements were consigned to some dark corner, Natalia plucked one of the bowls and made sure not to pack it together with the rest. She said that she was going to use it either as a soap dish or for coins, pins, and other small items. Natalia was very much invested in seeing the bowl as a reminder of the treasures now tucked away in her pile that would eventually find the light of

day when the "right time comes." While not a lot of room was left in the crammed apartment for a stray bowl, both Imelda and Natalia wanted something other than packages, luggage, and other piles of stuff to make up the apartment.

When I asked them whether they thought that the bowl was a decorative objet d'art, they looked at me as if I had just asked a stupid question. Imelda pointed to the chipped, worn condition of the bowl and asserted that both of them have other more beautiful and functionally decorative items in their possessions. However, this bowl was not really about adornment but was a reminder or, more specifically, a mnemonic trigger for other things hidden and buried amid the chaos of objects, packages, and possessions. I was not really clear about what she was saying. Imelda explained that after living in several dozen apartments, most of them under illegal leases, the precarious and itinerant lives they lead compel them to be always ready to move to another apartment as quickly as possible. In such events, having one's possessions or "stuff" already stored away made these regular occurrences less inconvenient and easier to deal with. Imelda further admitted that even with her own attempts to keep her possessions intact, things break, get lost, or have to be abandoned.

When I asked Natalia whether she thought that she would be dining with those plates and bowls in a proper dining room sometime in the future, she shrugged and said that nothing is ever certain. Imelda said that all of them had hopes, aspirations, and dreams of better times ahead, but at the same time she also was clear that those aspirational futures did not hold these women captive to objects and possessions. She implied that one can keep one's possessions in storage, but they will not last forever. Like Imelda, Natalia has had experiences where stored objects that held some kind of future potential were either left behind or discarded after becoming useless. The strategy of storing things in these rather jumbled ways does not always work well. Storage techniques such as those used in this household lead not to a posterity but to possible loss, breakage, and abandonment. Such eventualities are seen as necessary casualties—things break, we need to move on, we need to leave things behind.

Natalia and the other members of the Queer Six are impossible subjects. They live in situations that are constituted in secrecy, fear, and shame. The conditions that brought Natalia and the other members into the overcrowded, packed household are different from the pathological situations and traumas that have enabled the lives of hoarders. The disarray of the apartment was due to circumstances that forced six unrelated people to live together and gather their possessions in one very limited space. Natalia was not strongly wedded or attached to the idea of a future utility and value of any one object. She firmly believed in the impermanence of things. But that is not to say that she did not have a desire for or an attachment to certain objects—it was a belief riddled with ambivalence, tempered by the reality of her undocumented status, and scarred by previous struggles and losses.

What was clear from our discussion, and to which Natalia and Imelda would later confess, was that their aspirations and their practical stances were never clear-cut; they were "murky" and subject to "swings" or changes. Natalia argued that the bowl was a pivotal part of her daily life despite the big chance that she would have to leave it behind because of her itinerant life. It would seem that their murkiness of feelings and attachments to their "stuff" was a way to take the edge off the "cruel" sting of loss, failure, and abandonment that has become almost a routine in their lives as undocumented immigrants. Unlike Lauren Berlant, who has attributed "cruel optimism" to the neoliberal malaise of people living in precarity whose almost fetishistic attachments to things, processes, ideas, and institutions are the very conditions that hinder them from thriving, I contend that the Queer Six rely on contrasting moments of detachments, letting go, moving away, the pleasure of discovery, and the reality that nothing is ever really permanent in order to enable themselves to move literally and figuratively through times and spaces, beyond days and rooms.[13]

Objects, bodies, and other materials may seem new, can bring pleasure, and can provide some kind of function, but at the same time they all decay, rot, fall out of use, and get lost in the rubble. Objects, Natalia and Imelda agreed, have their allocated time and space. Once these objects go beyond their allocated temporal and spatial existence and usefulness, it is time to throw them out, albeit sometimes with a heavy heart. As Natalia astutely declared, she was always ready to move and "to get up and go." Itinerant lives such as those of the Queer Six, where the burden of stuff, the weight of material paraphernalia, is considered secondary to other concerns and other burdens—such as the fear of the federal government and its documents, possible arrest, prosecution, and deportation.

These fears and burdens point to the ephemeral and shifting sense of value. Value, then, is mercurial, subject to the vagaries of lives on the lam. At the same time, it also points to enduring structures of feelings, of moments of fear such as not having "official documents" and those moments of pleasure and wonderment such as finding "treasures" in the street. Despite the seemingly easy disposability of these objects, they do not in any way assuage the everyday struggles that both women recognized—the struggle to keep a job, pay the rent, send money to family back home, keep under the radar from the police and immigration authorities, and find some kind of pleasure somewhere. All these struggles are encased in the stuff but remain illegible, if not invisible, to a casual observer. What does one make of this apartment teeming with stuff and trappings of urban immigrant life? How does one begin to take these cluttered lives and spaces as an alternative archive?

Archiving Otherwise: The Queer Immigrant Archive

The ideal archive is about the management of the morass of memory. But what happens when disorder and chaos are the elements that make up the archival space?

What happens when, instead of orderly catalogs, makeshift arrangements teetering on the brink of anarchy become the "disorder" of things? What kinds of value get attached to persons and things that dwell in mess and disorder, and how can they be dynamically reframed as a way to think more broadly about political acts, aspirations, and stances? I turn to the ways in which the ethnographic vignette about the dishes and the lives and spaces of the Queer Six may be a way to think differently about archives and the stuff in it.

Archives are vested with authority, as Jacques Derrida has astutely pointed out in *Archive Fever*, in terms of ordering time and space and storing.[14] Robert Vosloo, in a critical reading of Derrida's work, reemphasizes the need to recognize the archive not only as a site of power but also as a vantage for promoting social justice and ethical responsibility. Such responsibility involves an "openness to the future" and a recognition of the limitations and exclusionary impulses of state and other institutional archives that seek to "officialize" and tether historical knowledge or understandings of the past in terms that do not engage with views from below.[15]

Following Vosloo, this essay is a way to center the lives and spaces of the Queer Six to promote a more sensitive and nuanced understanding of queerness and migration by upholding a particular notion of an archive enmeshed in clutter and disarray. The Queer Six household deviates from an idealized, pristine archive that systematically stores, retrieves, and communicates information about the past. The Queer Six's messy archive reflects the ways that official state-mandated knowledge is embodied in the stuff of paperwork and how such a queer household/archive rejects the primacy of the document by refusing legibility and establishing an alternative (dis)order of things. The "undocumented" immigrant is not someone who does not have documents but rather is someone whose papers are in disarray or not in proper, "official" state-sanctioned order. This mess or lack of documentary order is both the pivot of these queer immigrant lives and the burden they carry in the everyday.

The mess of the queer immigrant archive pivots on the "disorienting" effects of the various kinds of documents and objects as well as the swirling cauldron of feelings that inhabit the spaces, objects, and times of the queer undocumented immigrant.[16] The queer immigrant archive is an "archive of feelings" that echoes in more effective registers the ultimate truth of any and all archives—loss.[17] Loss can be seen in terms of the absence of access to the official discourses of the proper subject. For queer undocumented immigrants, the notion of origins, which is a fundamental fulcrum in the mobilization of citizenship, is not only unavailable but also impossible and perilous.

"Where are you from?" is a question that is posed to the foreigner, the noncitizen, and the queer. It is a question that comes from a power-laden state-centered vantage that demands a fixed reference, origin, or provenance from anyone seeking recognition. To accede to an "officializing" move and to answer such questions about where one was born and if one is a citizen would make an undocumented person

vulnerable and exposed to possible punitive actions from prosecution to deportation. The lack of fixed origins, which is often seen as a source of vexed perceptions and confusion, is at the same time a crucial component of queer as mess and a viable survival strategy for undocumented queer immigrants. For example, Natalia has often identified as Puerto Rican and Imelda has alluded to herself as Hawaiian to deflect any further inquiry into their immigration status. They rely on messing up their identities to survive scrutiny and surveillance. Therefore, queer immigrant archives and the impossible lives of queer undocumented immigrants persist in a perpetual refusal of fixed origins and temporal and semantic legibility and are cast in the whirling pool of often conflicting trajectories, desires, and aspirations.

The refusals of documentary "truths" of origins and legibility reside not only in the bodies of queer immigrants but also in their relationships with objects. In my accounts of the Queer Six household, I have tried to avoid normalizing notions about the relationship between persons and things. Scott Herring, inspired by Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, directs readers to the discrepant ways that marginalized and impossible subjects like hoarders and queers have a wayward relationship to material objects.[18] Such "material deviance," as Herring astutely calls it, operates in ways that do not rely on the romanticized and normative expectations of how things "typically" work in people's lives or, conversely, how people's lives typically work on things. I go back to Natalia's dishes as a way to seriously engage with Herring's notion. Consider a situation where someone comes into contact with Natalia's plates and bowls encased with her other belongings—left behind in a moment of haste. What kind of interpretation can be made while, on the one hand, holding the material objects and, on the other, hearing the story of Natalia, Imelda, and the other Queer Six household members? Why should Natalia keep those dishes when she herself finds the likelihood of using the implements in a "proper dining manner" to be either remote or nearly impossible given her own living conditions? Is this just a case of unbridled hopefulness, or is there something more?

To understand the archival usefulness of Natalia's dishes, it is important to repudiate a rational correspondence between the material value of the dishes, their functionality, and the various feelings and emotions that emerged from the moment when Natalia discovered them on the street to the time she took them home, stared at them lovingly, and then stored them—never to be used at least in the couple of years I have known the Queer Six. It is more crucial to get a sense of the disjunctions between Natalia's words and her actions and not enclose them within a cause/effect framework but to acknowledge the very muddled, illegible, and intractable lines between the material object, Natalia's own desires and aspirations, and the space of the apartment in the making of worlds and the creation of histories. I sought not to "create order" out of the quagmire of Natalia's words and deeds but to gesture to the workings of chaos, mess, and morass in ways that deflect simplistic questions of origins, functions, and value as part of a queering of the archive. This essay does not

clean up the mess but rather critically addresses the need to live with, against, and despite the mess.

Part of the problem that besets the queer immigrant archive, from the perspective of traditional historiography, is the validity of ephemera, material objects that are not indigenous to a particular group. Unlike an archeological dig of an ancient settlement, a contemporary observer coming into the Queer Six household will not have the delusional luxury of simplistically tying in objects with the people's habitus. The evidentiary problems of ephemera harken to the issue of fixed origins discussed above. That is, any attempt to fix provenances and origins will ultimately fail, if not be fruitless. The ephemera in the Queer Six household are precisely those that are impervious to clear itineraries of ownership and value. Things have been picked up in bargain stores, at the Salvation Army, and in trash bins in city streets and have undergone multiple origins, transitions, and functions unlike those things bought new in the mall or any other store. Indeed, objects bought in regular stores and the mall may find their way to the trash and to secondhand shops, hence ephemera do not allow themselves to be easily slotted into linear chronologies, singular narratives, or functional descriptions.

The significance of ephemeral evidence, such as Natalia's dishes, is not based on how it can be traced through a clear-cut genealogy and fixed strand of meaning; rather, its worth is about how it embodies the fleeting, nomadic, messy, and elusive experiences and processes of self-making (and, I may add, history making) particularly among what José Esteban Muñoz calls "minoritarian subjects" (which includes queers, people of color, immigrants, and many "others").[19] Muñoz astutely argues that ephemera go against preestablished disciplinary formations of evidence since it speaks to illegibility and lack of clarity. Ephemera are to some extent about mess and clutter—of seemingly disposable and trivial stuff. Finally, ephemera, he elegantly offers, are about "traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things."[20]

The "glimmers" and "traces" of Natalia's dishes can be gleaned in her attempts to appropriate these objects, bestow an alternative value to them (no longer somebody's trash), store them like treasure, and keep an eye on a future that may include a domestic scene of a dinner involving those implements. Following this line of thought about ephemera, the dishes together with the heaping mountains of possessions in the apartment combined with the stories of Natalia and the other members of the household hint at and subtly suggest the long, arduous process of resilient struggles, fleeting pleasures, hopeful aspirations, and manifold failures. The apartment, its objects and its inhabitants, and the embodied relationships enclosed within the space form a queer immigrant "living archive."[21] Such an archive initiates new ways of understanding history from below and fosters more expansive notions of queerness and migration. It also can help reorient activist and political discourses about time, space, and value—unfolding new vistas for what is significant and (im)possible for building new coalitions around immigration and queer issues. These

objects, bodies, experiences, and practices do not foreclose or "fix" a future. There is *no* "No Future" among the Queer Six. This archive involves the gathering and interpretation of historical "matter" that includes the tragic, the repulsive, the uncomfortable, the banal, and the seemingly trashy, off-kilter objects and bodily practices that may hint at political potentials, gesture to alternative narratives, and enable an openness to multiple futures.

Notes

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1. For a feminist and/or queer perspective on the archive, see Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
2. Home and Garden Television, or HGTV, is a cable channel devoted to home design, building, and interior decoration.
3. See Burton, *Dwelling*; and Robert Vosloo, "Archiving Otherwise: Some Remarks on Memory and Historical Responsibility," *Studia Historiae Ecclessiastiae* 31, no. 2 (2005): 379–99.
4. See Martin F. Manalansan IV, "Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City," *Social Text*, nos. 84–85 (2005): 141–55.
5. All informants have been given pseudonyms, and some identifying markers have been changed.
6. Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxvi.
7. My inspiration in thinking about impossibility, about impossible subjects and desires, has originated from the classics of Asian American studies, notably Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
8. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
9. I am grateful to Lisa Yoneyama for this felicitous phrase. For an excellent analysis of hoarders and queer material culture, see Scott Herring, "Material Deviance: Theorizing Queer Objecthood," *Postmodern Culture* 21, no. 2 (2011): 45; and Herring, "'Collyer

Curiosa': A Brief History of Hoarding," *Criticisms* 53, no. 2 (2011): 159–88. For the vibrant critical literature on material culture, see especially Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010); and Miller, *Home Possessions: Material Culture behind Closed Doors* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2001).

10. Emery Roe, *Making the Most of Mess: Reliability and Policy in Today's Management Challenges* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
11. John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
12. In the larger ethnographic project, I explore the ways that fabulosity, a consumptive yet aspirational narrative about self-making, is made possible with and despite the marginalized conditions of these undocumented queer immigrants. Such moments as mundane as old gowns, cheap soap, and furtive sexual escapades cut through the seemingly endless banal ordinariness of suffering and pathos.
13. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
14. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
15. Vosloo, "Archiving Otherwise."
16. On the disorienting effects of objects, see Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 25–64.
17. Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feelings*, 268. See also Burton, *Dwelling*, 3–30.
18. Herring, "Material Deviance," 45.
19. José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," in "Queer Acts," special issue, *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 5–11.
20. Ibid., 10.
21. Horacio Roque Ramírez, "A Living Archive of Desire: Teresita la Campesina and the Embodiment of Queer Latino Community Histories," in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 111–35.