Weird Digitization: Alternative Strategies for Archival Materials

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Abstract

This thesis draws on the theory of new materialism to posit an alternative approach to cultural heritage digitization. Modifying the method of critical digitization and synthesizing it with the method of thick description for the study of damaged cultural heritage, this thesis proposes the method weird digitization which seeks to challenge traditional selection criteria for cultural heritage digitization as well as challenging practices of mass digitization. Seeking to identify the cultural heritage objects that may be overlooked using traditional selection criteria as well as ones that may pose challenges to digitization, this approach seeks to highlight the value of damaged or otherwise “weird” cultural heritage while exploring how the digitization of these materials may practically be undertaken. This approach is practically assessed through the exploratory digitization and analysis of selected damaged photographs in the IKFF (Internationella Kvinnoförbundet för Fred och Frihet) collection housed within the KvinnSam (the Swedish National Resource Library for Gender Studies) archive at the Gothenburg University Library. The discussion explores the pragmatic, affective, and artistic benefits of such an approach to cultural heritage digitization.

Keywords

Digital Humanities; Digitization; Archival materials; Photography; Material culture.
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1 Introduction

In recent years, cultural heritage institutions have overwhelmingly embraced digitization as a way of increasing access to their collections. Due to large-scale digitization projects, the perception of many may be that the bulk of such collections have already been digitized. This is, however, far from the case. Most cultural heritage practitioners recognize that even well-funded large-scale or mass digitization projects cannot possibly digitize all analogue objects within their ever-growing collections. Increasing awareness of the environmental impacts of digitization further problematizes the model of mass digitization. Many cultural heritage institutions must be particularly selective about what does or does not get digitized due to limited resources such as staff, funding, and technological infrastructures. Physical cultural heritage collections themselves may be under-explored and under-described due to the persistence of these limited resources, compounding the challenges for digitization projects. Under-description may limit the usefulness of digitized cultural heritage, particularly for non-textual resources such as photographic images; such gaps in object description are often imported into digital realm.

Yet cultural heritage institutions must necessarily employ selection criteria to determine which objects are digitized and which remain undigitized. Such selection criteria often favour “the best” or most popular items within collections, as cultural heritage institutions understandably want to create access to their “treasures” for a variety of reasons, including increased visibility for the institution and the ability to secure funding for such projects. Yet denoting certain items as “the best” is, of course, never a neutral endeavour. Many scholars have noted a range of problems pertaining to selection criteria for cultural heritage collection development and digitization projects. Selection of certain materials over others may misrepresent cultural heritage by perpetuating dominant histories while obscuring histories that may challenge such dominant narratives.

This thesis explores the possible benefits of digitizing “the worst” items within an archival collection, in this case, severely damaged photographs. Focusing on such damaged items can highlight some of the challenges archives and cultural heritage institutions face by drawing attention to objects that have typically been less likely to be selected for public digital display. If digitization can be understood as playing a role in “preservation” (arguable, of course), then the fragile and damaged parts of the archives are probably the ones most in need of digitization. Further, selecting damaged items not typically selected for digitization may help to increase access to cultural heritage, unlocking the potential for research into lesser-known corners of cultural heritage.

One solution to some of the difficulties of digitization is to encourage “slow digitization” (Prescott & Hughes, 2018) or “critical digitization” (Dahlström, 2010; Dahlström, Hansson & Kjellman, 2012). Slow or critical digitization can encourage reflection on potential drawbacks of traditional selection criteria, which may allow for the generation of more detailed and usable metadata, among other benefits. This
project engages the method of slow or critical digitization for the purpose of critically reflecting upon the challenges damaged archival photographs pose for description and digitization. Through an examination of a particular set of damaged archival photographs, this project also seeks to challenge conventional selection criteria for digitization projects and to suggest alternatives. Uncritical digitization may amplify absences—rather than create access—within cultural heritage resources. Advocating for critical digitization encourages practices of care for the objects themselves as well as drawing attention to the archivists who have laboured on their behalf prior to digitization and those who work to maintain the physical and digitized resources. Critical digitization further allows for more careful construction of metadata for physical and digital objects, ideally making digitized cultural heritage more findable and more useful for researchers.

This project will suggest “weird digitization” as an alternative model for the digitization of cultural heritage. Weird digitization takes as its starting point the unusual, difficult, or even the “worst” items within cultural heritage collections as a way to represent the important edges of institutional collections. One category of “weird” objects within cultural heritage collections are damaged items, which are often disregarded in processes of digitization. Building on the theory of new materialism especially as articulated by Jane Bennett, this project posits that the nature of damaged items can draw users into more meaningful relation with these items, their materiality, their histories, their provenance, and their maintenance. Damaged objects compel users to reflect on temporality, history, fragility, and persistence. To explore the possibilities of weird digitization, this project will analyse a selection of damaged photographs from the IKFF collection in KvinnSam, the Swedish National Research Library for Gender Research, housed at the Gothenburg University Library.

This thesis responds to the following research questions which will be rearticulated in section 5.1:

1. How can new materialist theory inform the selection and description of archival photographs, especially when considering and undertaking digitization?
2. How can damaged cultural heritage objects provide value for archival collections, especially when considering objects for digitization?

The outline of the thesis which follows this introduction is as follows: Chapter 2 provides the necessary background to provide contexts for the photographs and their digitization, clarifying the history of KvinnSam, the Internationella Kvinnoförbundet för Fred och Frihet (IKFF) and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), and the online platform Alvin. Chapter 3 outlines previous research on archives and photographs; the digitization of cultural heritage; scholarship concerning damaged cultural heritage; and considerations of digital materiality. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the theoretical basis of the thesis which demonstrates how the theory of New Materialism may be applied to cultural heritage archives and digitization. Chapter 5 outlines purpose and aims of the thesis; re-presents research questions; and presents the methodology of the thesis. Chapter
also introduces the reader to practicalities such as the specific tools and materials used in this research as well as briefly outlining ethical and copyright considerations. Chapter 6 presents the analysis of the selected damaged photographs, illustrating the process and results of weird digitization. The discussion in Chapter 7 presents the cumulative findings of the analysis and discusses the potential limitations of the thesis. Finally, the conclusion in Chapter 8 summarizes the thesis as a whole and suggests possible future directions for research and practice in this area.
2 Background

This chapter briefly presents background on KvinnSam, the WILPF/IKFF, and the digital platforms used by KvinnSam in order to appropriately contextualize the exploratory digitization, analysis, and discussion of damaged IKFF Collection photographs undertaken in later chapters.

2.1 KvinnSam

KvinnSam is the Swedish National Resource Library for Gender Studies (Nationellt bibliotek för genusforskning). Initially named the Women’s History Archive from 1958-1971, then the Women’s History Collections (1971-2010), KvinnSam was first founded in 1958 as a private initiative by three women, two of whom were librarians working at the Gothenburg University Library. Shortly thereafter, it established itself as a foundation, though it was not until 1971 that a librarian position was officially funded for this work (Gärdinge, 2017).

The main goals were to establish resources for research into women’s history as well as to enable and increase future research in this subject area. To that end, it worked to collect manuscript materials, develop research and bibliographies, and to more clearly catalogue resources pertaining to women’s studies by the development of subject words (ämnesord). These goals continue to inform the work of KvinnSam today, even as its scope broadened to include men’s and gender studies alongside of women’s studies in 1997 (Gärdinge, 2017). It officially changed its name to its current one, KvinnSam: National Resource Library for Gender Studies, in 2010.

KvinnSam continues to be located at the Gothenburg University Library; it became a university-wide research infrastructure in 2018. KvinnSam has a physical space within the Gothenburg University Humanities Library, including a reading room housing its book and periodical collections. The resources in the reading room possess call numbers starting with “Kvinn” prior to their Dewey Decimal designations, marking them off as part of the distinct collection. KvinnSam supports research on women’s and gender studies through development and maintenance of databases (for example, KVINNSAM and GENA) which consolidate references in scholarly literature and research on women’s and gender studies. Its early work to improve cataloguing in the area of gender studies continues; KvinnSam continues to maintain and develop subject words (ämnesord) for gender studies (KvinnSam, Ämnesord, n.d.). Additionally, KvinnSam librarians and archivists provide reference and research assistance in the areas of women’s history and gender studies for students, academic researchers, and the general public (KvinnSam, For Researchers, n.d.).

For the past 25 years, one of KvinnSam’s main collaborators has been the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research. The Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research (Nationella sekretariatet för genusforskning) was established as a national unit at Gothenburg University in 1998. Currently designated as a “knowledge hub,” the secretariat “gathers and disseminates research, policy, knowledge and practice in the field of gender equality in a Nordic and comparative perspective” (Swedish
Secretariat, n.d.). In its current materials, the Secretariat emphasizes especially the relations between gender, power, and sustainability. The Secretariat works with the Nordic Information on Gender Cooperative (Nordisk information för kunskap om kön or NIKK); together, these organizations work to support research and develop policies concerning gender equality (Swedish Secretariat, n.d.). In addition to collaborating with this Swedish organization, KvinnSam is a member of other networks working the area’s women’s and gender studies, including Nordic Information Network Gender (NING) and is a member of Women’s Information Network Europe (WINE) (KvinnSam, 2018).

KvinnSam maintains and continues to grow an extensive manuscript collection with especial strengths in Swedish women’s history and women’s organizations (KvinnSam, 2018). These archival materials have been collected since the establishment of the organization in 1958, though at times, the support for the manuscript and archival materials have not kept pace with their collection. That is, in different periods, staffing and funding limitations have meant that there was only a single archivist working specifically with the ever-growing manuscript collections. In recent years, all staff work to have some familiarity with the archival materials. In 2021, “Archives Sprint” weeks were established to help prepare materials for possible movement to another facility should the planned construction of a new university library facility take place. While this construction now seems to have been postponed for the present, KvinnSam continues these “Archives Sprint” weeks which have had the benefits of working to better organize and describe materials that may have only received more cursory inventorying upon acquisition due to the aforementioned staffing and funding limitations throughout KvinnSam’s long history (personal communication with KvinnSam staff, internal documents).

Starting in the early 2000s, KvinnSam began to digitize some of their archival materials. These materials, which appear on KvinnSam’s current website as well as the cultural heritage platform Alvin (see section 2.3), include historical Swedish women’s periodicals from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries including titles such as IDUN, Hertha, and Tidevarvet as well as manuscript materials such as photographs and letters. Having been on the cutting edge of digitization with the periodicals, KvinnSam is currently planning to re-digitize those periodicals for better usability as digitization conventions and user practices have shifted in the intervening decades. Plans for digitization of additional archival materials continue, though the size and heterogeneity of the collection mean that only a small portion of the archive is ever likely to be digitized.

2.2 The WILPF, the IKFF and the IKFF Collection

The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), or Internationella kvinnoförbundet för fred och frihet (IKFF), in Swedish, is an organization which grew out of the suffrage, social work, and budding international peace movements of the early twentieth century. Though it has gone through significant changes throughout its century-long existence, the organization continues its “feminist peacebuilding” activities into the present (WILPF, n.d.).
For the purposes of this thesis, WILPF will be used when discussing the organization, its history, and its activities in their broader international contexts, while IKFF will be used when specifically discussing the Swedish section of the group. IKFF Collection will be used to refer to the specific archival materials from the Swedish section which are now located in KvinnSam’s archives. As the photographs from the IKFF Collection which are analysed in this thesis date from the Dublin Congress of 1926, the background provided in this section will focus primarily on the early history of the WILPF.

During the First World War, a number of European and North American women prominent in suffrage, social reform, and peace movements met at the International Congress of Women at the Hague “with the ambitious goal of stopping the war” (Confortini, 2012, p. 9; see also Foster, 1989). American social worker and suffragist Jane Addams presided over this meeting and would remain a central figure in the movement and later organization until her death in 1935 (Foster, 1989). While the goal of stopping the war was unrealized, the meetings in 1915 inspired a second international Congress in 1919, which was held in Zurich, which was the point at which the group officially organized, adopting the name the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (Foster, 1989). Following the end of the War, the WILPF established its headquarters in Geneva to establish proximity to the League of Nations (Confortini, 2012; Foster, 1989). Members of the organization founded and participated in national sections in their home countries, which would come to include countries outside of the global north (WILPF, n.d.). The IKFF, the Swedish national section, was one of the earliest national sections to organize, establishing itself in 1919 (IKFF, n.d.).

The early movement viewed the establishment of the rights of women, and especially voting rights, as intrinsically linked to peace, though individuals possessed somewhat heterogeneous views on the exact relationship between women’s rights and peace (Confortini, 2012). Yet many of the founders of the WILPF thought that women’s full participation in civic life “would bring an end to wars” (Foster, 1989, p. 16). When women’s voting rights were granted in the United States and a number of European countries, Foster, argues, the women’s movement “los[t] momentum”; this loss of momentum also meant a reassessment of the WILPF’s core feminist ideologies, with focus shifting more in the 1920s to its work with the League of Nations (Foster, 1989). As a pacifist movement, the WILPF supported—and continues to support—international disarmament; during the Second World War, powerful disagreements within the organization led to some fractures within the group between strict pacifists and those who “felt that the use of force in the cause of social justice should not be condemned” (Foster, 1989, p. 21).

As one of the oldest national sections of the WILPF, the IKFF or Swedish section, maintained records that dated back to their founding in 1919. The archival materials in the IKFF Collection in KvinnSam date primarily from the years between 1919 and 1990 when these materials were created, collected, and maintained by the organization itself. Some materials can be found dating somewhat earlier, as members of the organization deposited photographs and other materials that they saw as connected to the group’s activities prior to formal organization (IKFF...
Collection). The IKFF Collection includes records and documents from local Swedish sections as well as the national section; it also includes materials from the WILPF, especially pertaining to the regularly held International Congresses.

2.3 Digital Platforms

2.3.1 Alvin

Cultural heritage resources, both digitized and undigitized, from Gothenburg University Library, including those of KvinnSam, appear within Alvin. Alvin is “a platform for the long-term preservation and accessible storage of digitised collections and digital cultural heritage materials. It is also a catalogue of materials that have not yet been digitised” (Alvin, n.d.). Thus Alvin serves as both an online catalogue for undigitized analogue materials as well as allowing a more centralized access point to digitized collections within its member and affiliated institutions.

Alvin was primarily conceptualized as a digital platform to meet the challenges posed by non-book cultural heritage materials for online catalogs and digital platforms; its resources emphasize manuscript and archival collections, as well as allowing for the inclusion of images, objects, and even sound and video recordings. Alvin was developed and continues to be maintained by Uppsala University, in a consortium with Gothenburg University Library and the University Library at Lund. In addition to the central consortium of these three university libraries, Alvin houses cultural heritage resources for several other member institutions and affiliated cultural heritage organizations. These include resources from other university and educational institution libraries (such as Linnaeus University Library and the Royal Institute of Art), municipal libraries (such as the Västerås City Library), and a number of other museums and archives (such as the Swedish Museum of Natural History and the Museum of Medical History, Uppsala). With an eye toward financial sustainability, the consortium model of Alvin finances its operations “through annual membership fees,” with smaller and larger institutions paying fees that recognize their differing operating budgets and financial resources.

The genesis of Alvin began with some early digitization projects undertaken at Uppsala University Library in the 2000s. As was the case with many digitization projects of the era, projects, even those undertaken at the same institution, varied by approach, scope, technology, and interface. By 2011, a report for a project called LUPP (Digitization cooperation between the Diocesan library and Linköping University and Uppsala University Library) noted that “if no radical change is made, it is most likely that all these services will disappear as staff disappear or technical platforms become outdated” (Alvin, n.d.). Alvin was developed as an attempt make these digitized resources and services available and accessible more permanently. Alvin was thus conceptualized as a way to resolve some of the issues of what is often now called digital sustainability, as well as allowing collections to be more comprehensively searched and linked. Alvin was designed between 2012 and 2014 as part of the project ArkA-D, and launched in 2014. As of May 2020, it contained 300,000 records (Alvin, n.d).
2.3.2 KvinnSam Website and Bilddatabas

KvinnSam’s website is housed within the larger website structure of the Gothenburg University Libraries. The KvinnSam website contains links to information and history about KvinnSam, educational and research information (e.g., a timeline outlining key dates pertaining to women’s history in Sweden and “portals” with information about women’s history in Sweden), access to its searchable databases such as GENA and KVINNSAM, and access to digitized materials such as historical Swedish women’s periodicals as well as images such as digitized photographs.

As is the case for most webpages of the Gothenburg University Libraries, KvinnSam information and resources are available in Swedish with an option to view most pages in English. At times, the English pages contain more concise or slightly less information than the main Swedish pages. One notable exception to the English translation option is the Bilddatabas (Image database) which does not appear on the English version of the website at all; as the search words (ämnesord) for the database are in Swedish, this part of the website would have required a more complex process to translate. The Bilddatabas primarily contains digitized photographs from a variety of archival collections in KvinnSam, with most dating from the early part of the twentieth century. KvinnSam is currently in the late stages of redesigning their website; the Bilddatabas will not be migrated to the new website. After the redesigned website is launched, the digitized materials currently located in the Bilddatabas will appear only in Alvin, where they also currently reside (Pierce, 2023).

In outlining the background of KvinnSam, the WILPF/IKFF, and the digital platforms, this chapter has sought to provide practical contextualization for the photographs handled and analysed within this thesis. The following chapter will provide the scholarly contextualization necessary to frame the analysis by outlining previous research in a variety of applicable areas.
3 Previous Research

3.1 Archives and Photographs

3.1.1 Archives

This section briefly outlines scholarly understandings of the roles played by archives as repositories of cultural heritage documents, with an emphasis on the centrality of appraisal or selection criteria in the establishment, maintenance, and critique of archives.

As repositories for unique records, archives seek to preserve key sociocultural documents for future generations. While archives may present themselves as preserving complete records, it is certainly the case that no matter how comprehensive an archive, no archive is complete. Like cultural heritage at large, archives can never be “all-inclusive…democracies of things” (Petursdottir & Olsen, 2014, p. 15); choices have ever been made about what is worthy of collection and preservation within archives. Ariella Azoulay argues that “The archive does not preserve endangered documents as much as create documents as objects of preservation. This requires the destruction or discarding of others not worthy of preservation” (2019, p. 194). Archives thus stand as “constructions of particular types of knowledges within specific politicized ways of seeing the world” (Bailey, 2020, p. 247). And if “the archive is not simply about the past but is a matter of concern for the present,” the appraisals and selection criteria that ground archives become ever “more acute as the archive goes online” (McQuire, 2013, p. 232).

Some archival scholars thus consider appraisal, that is, “the process of determining whether records and other materials have permanent (archival) value” (Pearce-Moses, 2005, p. 22), as the foundation upon which archives and archival theory are built. Without appraisal, other key archival practices such as preservation, arrangement, and description are impossible. Through appraisal, archivists “are determining what the future will know about its past: who will have a continuing voice and who will be silenced” (Ridener, 2009, p. xiii-xiv). Understanding how and why appraisals were made within archives is thus vital to understanding the materials that now reside within them. Of particular interest for this thesis, it is often the case that various forms of damage may serve as a point at which documents and materials may be excluded from the archive, as they may challenge conventional archival understandings of “quality” records as well as posing challenges for future preservation (see for example, Petursdottir & Olsen, p. 2014; see also section 3.3).

In recent years, movements to “democratize” archives and cultural heritage, seeking to “involve the interests and concerns of marginalized others” (Petursdottir & Olsen, 2014, p. 15) have been increasing, evidenced by, for example the development of the scholarly subdiscipline of critical heritage studies. Azoulay cautions against “the paradigm of alternative history” (2019, p. 198), arguing that even such alternative histories can in fact “be guided by the imperial desire to unearth unknown ‘hidden
moments” (p. 199). Whatever term we may use for archives that may challenge imperial and other repressive societal norms, however, such archives can point to “the conviction that other political species were and continue to be real options in our present” (Azoulay, 2019, p. 199). KvinnSam’s archive serves as an excellent case-in-point of these possibilities, being developed and maintained as a way to challenge the earlier phallogocentrism of the historical record in Sweden.

Archives have the power to shape not only societies but also to shape the bodies of these documents and the bodies of archivists and researchers within them. Anthropological approaches to archives recognize the roles that archives play as bodies of knowledge, as places where bodies (both humans and objects) interact, and thus as places where bodies are, in some sense, shaped by the archive (Battaglia et al., 2020, p. 9). And as the stability of the archive is never assured, being “open to eruptive returns and entropic collapses, stylistic repackagings and critical revisions” (Foster, 2004, p. 17), critically reflecting on the nature of archives, especially as concerns the ways in which archives are constructed and digitized, is vital for scholars of cultural heritage.

3.1.2 Photographs in Archives

Allan Sekula’s classic “The Body and the Archive” (1986) uncovered the deep interconnections between the history of the archive and the history of photography, focusing especially on the ways in which archives and photography developed to classify criminality in the late 19th century. With photography able to “arrest” the images of criminal subjects, photographs and photographic archives promised social and scientific order. Photography could be used “as an important collecting tool” (Geismar, 2018, p. 50), assisting the development of “complete” archives. Yet the positivist promise of photography “was frustrated…both by the messy contingency of the photograph and by the sheer quantity of images. The photographic archive’s components are not conventional lexical units, but rather are subject to the circumstantial character of all that is photographable” (Sekula, 1986, p. 17). With photographs always “record[ing] more than what was intended” (Azoulay, 2019, p. 235), photographs may thus serve to challenge or break the archive even as they initially helped to enable its establishment and authority. This tendency for photographs to challenge archival assumptions make them particularly potent vectors for historical, material, and digital exploration and experimentation.

Because many archives have tended to focus upon textual documents, photographs may trouble archival organization that has primarily been designed to organize textual documents. Jasmine Burns notes that archival photographs “are sometimes physically separated from their collection of origin and are often organized by subject matter for purposes of access” (Burns, 2017, p. 4), which may create challenges for and even barriers to appropriate contextualization and interpretation. Because of the many interpretive difficulties that photographs pose, “photographs are often not perceived by historians, political theorists, or sociologists as reliable or informative enough…Photographs do not speak for themselves; they are usually filed carelessly in the archive with little information about their provenance. This careless handling of photographs, however, cannot be an excuse for ignoring them”
Within archival finding aids, for example, within the IKFF Collection finding aid available on Alvin (Figure 1), photographs are often simply noted as “photographs” without the more granular listings that often accompany textual resources such as correspondence. This is likely due to the fact that photographs pose descriptive challenges. While controlled vocabularies have been developed for visual resources, for example, the Library of Congress’ Thesaurus for Graphic Materials (TGM), many archivists may be unfamiliar with these, as much archival training tends to focus on the textual resources seen as most central to the vast majority of archives.

Often, the content or illustrative nature of photographs has been seen as their primary value, yet “as three-dimensional objects, [photographs] often serve a variety of functions in archival collections” (Burns, 2017, p. 4). Increasingly, scholars of material culture have argued that “the physical form of the photograph should be a larger focus of archival appraisal… and that an examination of this three-dimensionality reveals the context of [the photograph’s] creation and existence” (Burns, 2017, p. 3). Engaging seriously with archival photographs requires that care be taken when considering their histories and their materiality, viewing them as vital objects in themselves and not simply proxies for or illustrations of the written word. Further, such serious engagement with archival photographs may itself be considered part of “the photographic event,” as viewers of archival photographs “tak[e] part in the production of its meaning” (Azoulay, 2019). Without this engagement, archival photographs will only ever remain silent (or silenced) spectacles of history.

3.1.3 New Approaches to Archives: Archival Art and the ANARCHIVE

In this section, alternative approaches to traditional archives are briefly examined to exemplify the creative possibilities of archives; recognizing these creative
possibilities will be important for the later analysis and discussion of the damaged archival photographs central to this thesis.

Archival art can be defined as creative work that draws upon archival materials (McQuire, 2013). Often, these works of archival art seek to revision history in ways that may challenge existing hegemonies and to imagine new possibilities for the future (McQuire, 2013; Carbone, 2020); thus archival art can serve to inspire the development of alternative archives or unconventional interpretations of archives, not entirely dissimilarly to the goals of critical heritage studies (see section 3.1.1). McQuire argues that “Enabling artists to produce creative works from the archives becomes an avenue along which the dead weight of history can be leavened by an awareness to visit the protocols of its construction” (McQuire, 2013, p. 236); enabling archival artistic creations may be one method to assuage some of the more troubling histories of the archive (see section 3.1.1). Some have noted the “anarchival impulse” of archival art (Foster, 2004), with the anarchic tendencies of such art challenging the seeming stability of the traditional archive. In the discussion developed in Chapter 7, the aesthetic and critical potential of the archival photographs analyzed within the thesis will be further explored.

While used as a theoretical concept, the term “anarchive” has also been adopted for a particular artistic-archival endeavor, the ANARCHIVE, which seeks to reconceive “cultural memory and digital preservation in the new media age” (Lessard, 2009, p. 316). An archive of digital archive of media arts, the ANARCHIVE digitally archives works of media and video artists. At its creation, this consisted of cd-rom and dvd-rom media that included databases of the digital artists’ works as well as preserving and presenting that work. The ANARCHIVE demonstrates “that a relational aesthetics should come to occupy a more central role than materiality in the appreciation and preservation of cultural and media memories.” Functioning as “a peculiar digital archive…it not only chronicles the past but also functions as a new work with which to interact” (Lessard, 2009, p. 316). The ANARCHIVE project serves as an excellent exemplar of both digital materiality (see section 3.4) and demonstrates some of the potentiality of digital thing-power (see section 4.4). The discussion in Chapter 7 will likewise consider how the exploratory digitization of the damaged archival photographs within this thesis may demonstrate such a relational aesthetic.

3.2 Digitization of Cultural Heritage

This section provides a brief overview of attitudes and approaches to digitization in the cultural heritage sector, with particular emphasis on how selection criteria shapes practices of cultural heritage digitization. By noting common cultural heritage digitization practices concerning selection criteria, this section seeks to highlight potential limitations in existing cultural heritage digitization practices, limitations which this thesis seeks to address.

In the last few decades digitization has been overwhelmingly embraced within the cultural heritage sector. While some understandings of digitization focus simply the creation of digital images, most scholars in the field recognize digitization “as the
intricate and multi-faceted material process of converting analogue forms of information storage into digital bits” (Tanner et al., 2016, p. 14). Digitization thus includes a variety of activities beyond digital imaging, from metadata creation to the development and maintenance of digital storage to the creation or application of display interfaces to allow users to access digitized cultural heritage. Digitization is primarily seen as a way to increase access to cultural heritage, increasing opportunities for teaching and research (Terras, 2012). Though Melissa Terras notes that “Research questions remain about the use and usefulness of digitized content and the cost of digitization, delivery and maintenance of digitized collections” (p. 57), massive resources are being devoted to the digitization of cultural heritage.

While some popular views of digitization perceive it as a means of preservation, most cultural heritage digitization scholars contest the idea that digitization functions as preservation, pointing out that digitization in fact creates new preservation challenges, requiring institutions who engage in digitization to continue to attend to physical preservation and conservation practices while adding the new demands of digital preservation to those existing challenges (Ireland & Bell, 2021; Campagnolo, 2020). Further, digitization itself has the potential to damage delicate originals if not undertaken with care; some digitization practices, such as the digitization of newspapers and periodicals, in fact destroy the originals during the imaging process. Thus conservators and digitization specialists are often seen as working at cross purposes (Burns, 2017).

In some cases, however, digitization can assist preservation strategies, through for example, reducing wear and tear on a delicate original by encouraging user access to a digital surrogate (Hughes, 2004; Terras, 2012). Digital imaging can also aid preservation by creating records of conditions at particular points in time, helping conservators to track condition changes and to intervene as needed (Campagnolo, 2020). Some scholars note that arguments against digitization as preservation have tended to focus on components of the original resource that “are lost in the process of digital reformatting” and suggest that “advancements in contemporary imaging technologies” may necessitate a reappraisal of these arguments (Burns, 2017, p. 5).

Yet it is certainly the case that digital resources come with their own preservation challenges, which are now added to the preservation challenges for the physical resources.

With the advancements in contemporary imaging technologies just noted, digitization has the potential to greatly enhance the study and appreciation of cultural heritage, having the potential to “make readable invisible texts or features, flatten irretrievably distorted or rolled documents, rearrange pages beyond their physicality, and evidence the history and use of documents” (Campagnolo, 2020, p. 3). These possibilities especially demonstrate “the merit and enhancing nature of digital surrogates,” with the “transformative nature of the digitization process” allowing digital objects to “transcend the originals, work in synergy with them, and make them something more” (Campagnolo, 2020, p. 1, 2-3). Mats Dahlström has noted additionally that “as with other forms of culturally sanctioned reproduction, digitization adds a status to the document being digitized. The document is granted
Thus digitization has the potential to enrich the original physical object in a variety of positive ways.

Because digitization is a resource-intensive undertaking, especially when the kinds of more complex techniques just discussed are deployed (Terras, 2012), selection criteria which are intrinsic to all cultural heritage curation need to be deployed ever more stringently. Yet the limitations of more selective selection criteria are thus amplified through the digitization of that heritage. As Geismar cautions, “new media does not necessarily entail new social and political relations and can in fact perpetuate old forms of inequality as well as producing new ones” (Geismar, 2018, p. 27). The need to critically appraise selection criteria, both within physical cultural heritage collections and within the digitized portions of such collections is thus vital (Tanner et al., 2016). Many scholars have noted that materials selected for digitization should ideally be ones which can provide the greatest benefits to users (Hughes, 2004; Terras, 2012), but identifying and assessing what constitute the greatest benefits remains challenging and prone to biases. While mass digitization of cultural heritage has been hailed as a way to overcome potentially problematic selection criteria (Campagnolo, 2020), it is clear that mass digitization comes at the expense of other forms of nuance and care, with physical originals often obscured from their digital surrogates (Dahlström, 2019; Hansson, 2021). Alternative approaches to mass digitization such as slow digitization (Prescott & Hughes, 2018) or critical digitization (Dahlström, Hansson, & Kjellman, 2012; Hansson, 2021) seek to “focus on smaller numbers but on utilizing as many digitization techniques as necessary to build digital tools that are truly complementary to the originals” (Campagnolo, 2020, p. 238). These approaches will be the key for the method developed within this thesis and will be outlined in greater detail in Section 5.2.1.

As the digitization of cultural heritage materials has become widespread, reflecting upon the nature of digitization as well as the assumptions underpinning selection criteria when undertaking digitization projects is vital. As Geismar argues, “By thinking of digitisation as a cultural process of interpretation and meaning-making, we can open up what has often been radically naturalised in both museum and digital environments. It is this naturalisation that creates what I call…‘reality effects’—the perceptions of the real that are actually carefully constructed and produced through a wide range of media” (Geismar, 2018, p. 27). Challenging these “reality effects” can enhance digitization practices by documenting and critically reflecting upon the choices made in cultural heritage digitization projects. This thesis documents the selection decisions made for the exploratory digitization undertaken in the analysis (see especially section 6.1).

### 3.3 Damaged Cultural Heritage

As a field of study and practice, cultural heritage management at its core seeks to maintain and preserve objects, practices, and places for future generations (Arndt, 2022; Introna, 2014). Because of this, cultural heritage professionals have historically sought to maintain cultural heritage documents, objects and sites, attempting to arrest damage and decay (Introna, 2014), though this ideal of preserving cultural heritage may sometimes find itself at odds with other cultural
heritage ideals, such as that of creating access to cultural heritage materials (Arndt, 2022).

Many cultural heritage materials are only brought into the care of cultural heritage organizations once they have already been significantly damaged and fragmented. In many cases, therefore, the preservation impulse goes further, with cultural heritage professionals seeking to repair and even to reconstruct damaged cultural heritage often through the outlay of enormous resources (DeSilvey, 2017; Burström, 2013; Ogborn, 2004). Because of these resource-heavy realities, it is certainly the case that selection criteria again play a key role in determining which objects or sites are ultimately worthy of preservation and conservation. Such selectivity is not necessarily a neutral good; citing the work of Cornelius Holtorf and Anders Högborg, DeSilvey notes “our efforts to preserve as much as possible might backfire, given that future generations may perceive as less valuable what is less rare, and an abundance of preserved heritage sites and features may inspire indifference rather than the intended appreciation” (2017, p. 178).

Even with the impulse to preserve as much as possible, preservation is often a losing game. Some damaged cultural heritage is necessarily excluded from collections, for example, due to overly degraded conditions which be seen as erasing what value they may once have contained and which, in some cases, may pose a risk for the stability of the larger collection, as for example, in the case of mold which could spread to and damage other materials within a collection. Cultural heritage sites especially may reach breaking points at which the cost of preservation and conservation may become too great; though in many cases, decisions to allow such sites to lapse into a state of controlled decay remain controversial (DeSilvey, 2017).

Processes of decay and instances of damage are thus typically viewed by cultural heritage professionals as occurrences to be avoided at all costs (Ireland & Bell, 2021) in order to appropriately preserve cultural heritage for current and future generations. These preservative and conservative attitudes have been so naturalized within the cultural heritage sector that their own assumptions and origins have, until recently, largely gone unquestioned, simply being taken as a self-evident “good.” Yet these practices in fact “emerg[ed] in Europe in the modern age, alongside technologies aiming to take control over nature, including processes of organic decay” (Arndt, 2022, p. 289). Recognizing that the preservation impulse is the product of particular intellectual and cultural developments can allow for and even encourage a critical appraisal of this impulse. Questioning the preservation impulse allows for the discovery of the fact that there may in fact be “ways of valuing the material past that…instead countenance the release of some of the things we care about into other systems of significance” (DeSilvey, 2017, p. 17).

Cultural heritage scholars who have begun to question the preservation impulse seek to explore the positive possibilities of allowing damaged cultural heritage to remain damaged and even, in some cases, to decay. For ease this thesis will favour the generic term “damage” as inclusive of various forms of decay, ruination, fragmentation, destruction, though many of the scholars cited will emphasize specific and particular types of damage. When citing specific scholarly work, the
specific terms for damage used by the authors will then be noted. While not the majority view, a number of scholars increasingly identify “the affordances and potentialities” (Hudson, 2014) of damaged cultural heritage, or view damage as “an interpretive asset that evokes interest and stimulates the imagination” (Burström, 2013, p. 311). They argue that damaged cultural heritage can be a potentially powerful vector for history, memory, and knowledge. Many emphasize the relational opportunities offered by damaged cultural heritage, describing the experiential, aesthetic, epistemological, and ontological impacts that witnessing damaged cultural heritage may evoke. Closely observing damage “allows us to look at the processes by which worlds are assembled and to accept that any given system, be it a granite chimney stack or an artwork, has the potential to unfold along multiple trajectories” (DeSilvey, p. 12-13). These observations can allow for better understandings of the natural processes at work on all cultural heritage, with DeSilvey noting that some in her field have even proposed “heritage body farms” that could allow such knowledge to be generated through controlled observations of cultural heritage decay (2017, p. 148). These perspectives share similarities with—if often implicitly—the theoretical approach of new materialism which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Rather than viewing damage as something in need of fixing, scholars interested in the positive potentialities of damage often describe the need to overcome the preservation impulse and to meet damage intimately, on its own terms (Petursdottir & Olsen, 2014; DeSilvey, 2017). Meeting damage on its own terms elicits attitudes of care which are distinct from the preservation impulse; these can include ideas like “palliative curation” which, like hospice care for dying persons, seeks to “respectfully and attentively [ease things] into their inevitable deaths” (DeSilvey, 2017, p. 161). Reflecting on the positive potentialities of damage can also provoke meaningful engagements with cultural heritage. Writing on a particular type of damaged cultural heritage that he calls “fragments,” Burström notes that “the very lack of a complete original…fascinates people and invites interpretation…giv[ing] people an active role in the interpretative process, and this engagement may in itself be the most important aspect of the relationship” (2013, p. 313). Some scholars note the aesthetic, ethical, and affective facets of positive attitudes toward damage, which could provide more than a “purely scientific value” (Burström, 2013, p. 311; see also DeSilvey, 2017; Petursdottir & Olsen, 2014). These possibilities may stem from the fact that “the very inevitability of decay engenders a phenomenological consciousness not only of the self but also of the ways in which that self is related to wider social structures and environments” (Buckley, 2005, p. 265). Thus scholarship on damaged cultural heritage often consider the ethical and environmental issues that are brought to light when meditating upon damaged cultural heritage.

Focusing on the positives of damaged cultural heritage as damaged, and not as something to be fixed, hidden, or discarded can help shift normative selection criteria. To take one example, the Library of Stains project carefully digitized “dirty” or stained medieval manuscripts in order to collect scientific data about the stains within these manuscripts. This has provided valuable information about the ways in which these manuscripts were historically used, opening up new avenues for research. Recognizing the potential value of damage, the project “set out to
privilege the very manuscripts that are often overlooked due to heavy soiling and damage, and to use their stains, which have typically been undervalued, to learn more about their history and use” (Wacha, 2019, n.p., emphasis mine). In this case, it is the damage itself, which had caused these manuscripts to be considered “less valuable” than more pristine exemplars, that may actually provide more historical and scientific value.

Of course, this is not to say that all damage is positive or that avoidable damage should be simply be accepted. Harrison warns that “By representing modernity as past and in ruin, there is a danger that it is simultaneously domesticated and made to appear both inevitable and benign” (2011, p. 152). Certainly not all damages to cultural heritage are benign, as is painfully visible in the recent invasion of Ukraine, for example. Yet in the instances analysed by the scholars cited above as well as, in the case presented within this thesis, damage can provide outlets for rethinking cultural heritage norms and generate new opportunities for knowledge and creativity. And perhaps these approaches may in turn provide strategies to navigate the traumas of more malicious damage too.

3.4 Digital Materiality

This section outlines the concept of digital materiality; understanding this concept is vital for critical considerations of the digitization of cultural heritage. Section 4.4 will further consider this concept of digital materiality in closer relation to the new materialist theory outlined in Chapter 4.

Digital materiality has no single definition; scholars have developed competing if often interlocking understandings of this concept. For some, digital materiality primarily underscores the physicality of digital technologies such as, for example, the server farms upon which “the cloud” depends, networks of undersea cables, and the mined and engineered components of computers and smartphones (Geismar, 2018; Gonzalez Monserrate, 2022; Parikka, 2012). For these scholars, highlighting the physical realities and environmental impacts of digital technology is of vital importance; ignoring these realities and impacts means ignoring the many harms that technologies may wreak on living beings and their natural and social environments.

Yet some scholars, like Katherine Hayles might consider these approaches as illustrative of digital physicality, which they would distinguish from digital materiality (2002). Summarizing Hayles's distinction, Campagnolo writes that “While physicality is a permanent quality, an infinite set of physical attributes that make up the reality of the object, materiality, instead, is an emergent property that depends on the attention of some observer to isolate as meaningful some particular attributes, setting them aside from the continuum of physicality” (Campagnolo, 2020, p. 2). In this sense, digital materiality requires observation and interaction; the concept of digital materiality recognizes a kind of life in digital objects: “digital materiality…succinctly encapsulates a process of meaning making and knowledge production that emphasizes technology-in-practice rather than a technological artifact” (Shep, 2016, p. 323). Recognizing the potential for meaning-making and
technology-in-practice allow for understandings of digitized cultural heritage as something more than simply the creation of “surrogates.” Instead, digital objects can and do offer their own particular and powerful qualities.

Many negative or at least instrumentalist arguments against digitized cultural heritage and digital media have applied Walter Benjamin’s classic work on the loss of aura through mechanical reproduction to the creation of digital “surrogates” through digitization practices. These arguments may view digitized cultural heritage as having “eliminate[d] the materiality of the original object” (Burns, 2017, p. 4). Yet these arguments “[do] not account for the selection process, advancements in contemporary imaging technologies, or the archivist’s labor in creating descriptive metadata” (Burns, 2017, p. 7). Kenderdine, Hibberd, and Shaw have suggested the term “radical intangibles” as a way “to convey the paradigmatic change that digital materiality has wrought on objecthood and its ontologies, which are driving a new era of archiving lived and living cultures” (2021, p. 252-253). Recognizing both the physicality and the materiality of the digital is essential when digitizing cultural heritage; failing to do so may lead to the development of unethical, unsustainable, unusable, and disengaging digital cultural heritage.

The theory of new materialism can assist not only in attending carefully to the potentiality of damaged archival objects, but also to the consideration and generation of digital objects. This theoretical approach and its applications to both physical and digital “things” will be explored in the next chapter.
4 Theoretical Basis

The theory of new materialism can be a fruitful approach when exploring and sitting with the materiality of damaged photographs, whether in their physical or digitized forms. While new materialism has been applied in recent years in the contexts of museum studies and cultural heritage studies, especially those focusing on archaeology and historic sites, it has been applied less in library and archival studies. Yet new materialism can enrich a consideration of the materiality of archives and archival objects such as documents and photographs and can help inform new approaches to digitization. New materialism can assist in more meaningful interpretations of archival objects as well as encouraging archivists to (re)consider the nature and purpose of (digitized) archival collections themselves. In addition, new materialism may inspire users to more meaningfully reflect upon the “lives” of the archival materials they are accessing, whether in physical or digital form.

This chapter first outlines the theory of new materialism (section 4.1) before surveying how the theory has thus far been applied in digital humanities scholarship and cultural heritage contexts. Next, the theory of new materialism is applied to archival objects (section 4.2) and archival institutions (section 4.3). Finally, an examination of new materialism is explored as an approach which may help archivists and archival users to negotiate “weird” things, such as damaged objects (section 4.4) and digitized objects (section 4.5). In so doing, the foundation is laid for the methodological approach, analysis, and discussion in the following chapters.

Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) serves as a key starting point for the discussion of this theoretical approach. While Bennett prefers the term “vital materialism” for her approach, the phrase “new materialism” has perhaps become the most dominant term for Bennett’s and related theoretical perspectives. Therefore, this thesis will primarily use the phrase “new materialism” when referring to the theoretical approach taken.

4.1 New Materialism and Vibrant Matter

In articulating her theory, Bennett advocates for a recognition of “the vitality of matter,” that is, a recognition of “a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies,” urging “attentiveness, or even ‘respect’ ” for matter. By encouraging humans to attend to the vitality of matter, Bennett hopes for “the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption” (2010, p. ix). In this way, new materialism promotes thoughtful and careful considerations of material objects, what Bennett will call “things,” as a way to engage with the world more meaningfully and less violently. While Bennett does not specifically discuss how this approach may apply to cultural heritage, as will be shown, it is one that can certainly resonate within that context.

Two central concepts developed by Bennett are of particular benefit when considering applications of new materialism to (damaged) cultural heritage: the concept of *thing-power* and the concept of *assemblages*. The concept of thing-
power builds upon and modifies earlier theoretical concepts such as Bruno Latour’s *actant* and Gilles Deleuze’s *operator*. According to Bennett, these concepts point to a kind of agency, but one that is “distributed across a wider range of ontological types” (2010, p. 9). Bennett writes that “Thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience” (2010, p. xvi). Thing-power describes “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (2010, p. 6). Drawing on the work of W. J. T. Mitchell, Bennett distinguishes “things” from “objects”; unlike simple “objects,” “things” do not remain isolated, but engage with and act upon human beings in a variety of ways (2010, p. 2).

To illustrate this point, Bennett draws attention to seemingly worthless “things,” such as a collection of debris she encountered in a storm drain on a Baltimore city street one day. The collection includes a “large men’s plastic work glove,” a “dense mat of oak pollen,” an “unblemished dead rat,” a “white plastic bottle cap,” and a “smooth stick of wood.” She describes the ways that these “dead” or discarded things continue to act and react in the world in subtle but pervasive ways. For example, two of the items in the collection of debris were made of plastic (the black plastic work glove and the white plastic bottle cap); compositionally, plastic may be considered largely inert, which is what causes barriers to natural decomposition. Many now recognize on the ways in which discarded plastics may interact with their environments in various ways, littering streets and entering waterways, soil, digestive tracts, and even bloodstreams when broken down into microplastics. Thus, rather than being inert objects, the discarded black plastic work glove and white plastic bottle cap will continue to have lives far beyond those for which they were originally created, continuing to act and to enter into relations with other things. While advocating for the concept of thing-power as a way to call attention to the lives of “things” and the ways that such things function outside and alongside human activity, Bennett seeks to call human attention to the things that surround us, and to recognize the complexity and activity of these things.

Bennett herself identifies two drawbacks (what she calls “liabilities”) to the concept of thing-power. First, she notes that thing-power is really only able to “[attend]…to the vitality of stable or fixed entities (things)” (2010, p. xvii). This means that, though she recognizes that “things” are unstable and in flux, the term thing-power may reify a thing’s, well, thing-ness. Identifying and classifying a thing as a “thing” may inadvertently limit our willingness to understand how that thing changes over time. The thing examined in this moment may become quite a different thing in minutes, days, months, years, or centuries. This is perhaps most apparent in the case of the “unblemished dead rat” which Bennett observed in the storm drain; it is unlikely that this dead rat remained “unblemished” for very long. Basic knowledge of biological processes make probable the hypothesis that, after Bennett’s observation, the dead rat likely went through a process of decomposition in the storm drain, probably aided by scavenging behaviours of other animals like crows or (living) rats. Thus the rat-thing was not a stable entity, as it quickly would interact with other things to become, for example, a food-thing or a skeleton-thing.
or a nest-thing; these new things would in their turn continue to interact with other things in the environment.

This last observation brings us to the second “liability” that Bennett outlines when reflecting upon her concept of thing-power. She writes that “[thing-power] presents…vitality in terms that are too individualistic (even though the individuals are not human beings)” (2010, p. xvii). That is, in identifying a “thing,” linguistically and thus conceptually, it is necessary to atomize that thing, to separate it from other things, to hold it as central, even as a new materialist would simultaneously wish to recognize the ways that any one thing necessarily interacts with and depends upon many other things. For this reason, Bennett advocates for the concept of *assemblages* as a way to positively disorient the emphasis on things as individual and stable entities. Building on Spinoza’s concept of *conative* or *affective bodies* and Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of *assemblages*, Bennett uses her concept of the assemblage to underscore the ways that all “things” are always in relation with humans and other things (2010, see esp. p. 21). For Bennett, thinking about things as assemblages encourages a shift from thinking about things solely as matter or as entities to thinking about things also as forces or as energies (2010, p. 20), constantly acting and interacting with many other things.

Bennett’s concepts of thing-power and assemblages are thus useful in drawing attention to things and their qualities at particular moments in time, while also helping us to recognize that things are not as stable, singular, and simplistic as they may first appear. For Bennett, such realizations are not meant to be purely abstract theoretical observations, rather, they are ultimately meant to affect and influence human behaviours and attitudes. The intention of vital materialism is to bring humans into more meaningful and thoughtful relations with the things that surround them, “induc[ing them] to treat nonhumans—animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities—more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically” (2010, p. 17-18). This near-moral imperative, coupled with a positive focus on materiality, has inspired the application of new materialism to a variety of academic disciplines. For the purposes of this thesis, applications of this theory will be limited to a brief consideration of applications of new materialism in the fields of digital humanities (broadly construed) and cultural heritage.

In the field of digital humanities, focusing on the areas of media theory or media archaeology, Parikka has drawn on the theory of new materialism to think about what he calls “the weird materialities of contemporary technological culture” (Parikka, 2012, p. 97), pointing especially to the way that new materialism can assist us in thinking through the interconnections between technologies, their component parts, their chains of production, and their waste, which he calls “dirty matter.” New materialism, with Bennett’s concepts of thing-power and assemblages, allows Parikka to more forcefully demonstrate the ways in which technical media is inextricably material; what he calls “weird materialities” which may include “touchable objects” but also the “real…modulations of electrical, magnetic, and light energies, in which…power is nowadays embedded” (Parikka, 2012, p. 96). The ephemeral nature of digital or technical media is, in fact, quite material; such media can “do stuff, make a difference, and [quoting Bennett] ‘become the decisive force
catalyzing an event” (Parikka, 2012, 98). Thinking about technical media in this way can encourage reflection on its materiality, which in turn, can enable media to be better understood, critiqued, modified, and designed.

New materialism’s emphasis on thinking carefully about “things,” has likewise resonated with many in the cultural heritage field, both those working with physical objects as well as those working with digital ones like digitized cultural heritage and born-digital objects. The following sections will provide a brief overview of the ways in which new materialism has been and may be applied in the context of cultural heritage to demonstrate how this thesis will apply this theoretical approach to the damaged archival photographs in both their physical and digital incarnations.

4.2 Thing-power in the Archives

Unsurprisingly for a field focused on material culture, many scholars and practitioners of cultural heritage have taken up the theory of new materialism as a lens through which to more carefully consider objects in their care. Unlike Bennett’s storm drain collection, objects in cultural heritage collections are generally considered the opposite of “debris”; they considered are things worth saving, things that should be saved (see Chapter 3). Thus, the “power” of cultural heritage “things” has perhaps long been recognized, albeit ways somewhat distinct from new materialist perspectives. The powers of cultural heritage objects are typically linked to their histories and provenance, which provide them with authenticity and an aura. Walter Benjamin writes that “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (Benjamin, 1973, p. 215). It is this authenticity that gives a work of art or, more broadly, a cultural heritage object, its aura. The aura of an object is linked to the sensation that an object has a closeness to a past due to knowledge of the object’s “chain of proximity” (Jeffrey, 2015, p. 147). This may be seen, for example, when considering common objects that are considered special and elevated to the status of “cultural heritage object” due to their past creation, ownership and use. The public who may view these items receives the sensation of proximity to a significant past. I myself have had this sensation when, for example, examining manuscripts and letters in an archive; the act of handling a piece of paper that was handled by a historically significant individual feels powerful due to the authenticity and thus the aura with which that paper is imbued. In some ways, perhaps, new materialism can serve to democratize the aura; for Bennett, all things have power, provided we stop to consider and reflect seriously upon their materiality.

New materialism can help scholars attend to the ways in which cultural heritage “things” have “power,” not only due to their histories and provenance, but also due to their very materiality. Scholars in the fields of conservation and preservation have necessarily long had interest in the material composition of the objects in their care. Understanding material composition is essential for appropriate preservation and conservation. Such scholars also have long considered the many interactions between cultural heritage objects and environmental processes such as decay, erosion, oxidation, and infestation in addition to human-induced processes such as
patterns of use, modification, addition, damage, and destruction. Often the lines between the human and non-human processes may be difficult to discern: human choices about the storage and maintenance of a cultural heritage object necessarily involve non-human actors. Those who care for and study cultural heritage objects have great interest in demonstrating the ways in which those objects have affected and were affected by their surrounding environmental and cultural contexts. Thus new materialism may offer a compelling if challenging theoretical approach when considering cultural heritage objects. New materialism, what others have called “thing theory,” makes objects at once common and unique, and it has the potential to change the ways that we think about the stability, value, and opportunity of these objects (Mida, 2019).

Focusing primarily on cultural heritage sites, Caitlin DeSilvey’s Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving takes Bennett’s new materialism as one starting point for her proposal that cultural heritage specialists should think differently about processes of decay and entropy, particularly as these processes pertain to cultural heritage sites or built cultural heritage. She encourages a “radical willingness to find positivity in processes that are currently framed in largely negative terms” (DeSilvey, 2017, pp. 9-10). In so doing, DeSilvey proposes a model for cultural heritage that embraces physical changes for ethical, environmental, practical, and sometimes even aesthetic reasons. She posits the following premises: “the disintegration of structural integrity does not necessarily lead to the evacuation of meaning; processes of decay and disintegration can be culturally (as well as ecologically) productive; and, in certain contexts, it is possible to look beyond loss to conceive of other ways of understanding and acknowledging material change” (DeSilvey, 2017, p. 5). As arresting processes of decay and disintegration have been central to much cultural heritage work (see section 3.3), DeSilvey’s approach challenges the foundations of cultural heritage practices which typically understands conservation and preservation as some of its primary responsibilities.

In the context of cultural heritage sites, unavoidably exposed to the elements, DeSilvey’s approach is perhaps somewhat less radical than it is when considering cultural heritage materials housed in closed environments such as museum, archive, and library collections. For example, DeSilvey considers the ways in which coastal erosion, made increasingly dramatic due to climate change, may make some cultural heritage sites ultimately untenable; rather than making heroic efforts to save all these sites, she argues that it may be that some of them will simply be “beyond saving.” Elsewhere she nuances this perspective somewhat, noting the need to balance inevitable changes such as climate and coastal change with the potential violence in not helping those most affected by these changes (DeSilvey, 2020). Still, DeSilvey’s perspectives on non-resistance to natural processes such as decay ask us to consider radically different models of caring for cultural heritage sites and objects, calling into question long-standing attitudes about preservation and conservation. The preservation of cultural heritage sites and objects requires continual and sometimes drastic interventions; these interventions may change, sometimes radically, the nature of the objects that they seek to “preserve.” DeSilvey notes that “acts of preservation obscure and eliminate certain traces of the past even as they secure others” (2017, p. 14). The desire to preserve cultural heritage objects
may not always be wrong, but neither may it always be right. Attempts to arrest decay come with costs, whether those costs are financial, environmental, social, moral, or even ontological.

Recent research makes it clear that many earlier preservation and conservation practices have had real and often negative effects on cultural heritage objects, which in turn may negatively impact the individuals and communities who may wish to access them. Arndt (2022) discusses preservation practices in European museums that employed chemical treatments on artifacts, especially ones acquired in colonial contexts, throughout the 20th century; these practices now complicate the ability for people to engage with these objects. While recent developments in cultural heritage preservation—especially within enclosed and climate-controlled storage in museums, libraries, and archives—tend now to eschew these chemically problematic practices, instead focusing on more environmentally neutral processes such as proper storage, the emphasis remains on preservation of the objects in cultural heritage collections (Arndt, 2022). In many collections, toxic residues continue to persist within cultural heritage collections that previously employed these poisonous methods. Arndt writes that “decades of chemical treatments have left considerable residues in many collections”; poor documentation of these practices and the persistence of the chemical residues means that it may be difficult to identify and impossible to remediate these objects to make them safe for use (Arndt, 2022, p. 285). Recent efforts to repatriate cultural heritage objects to indigenous communities are made even more complicated and sometimes even “traumatic” and impossible due to these past conservation and preservation practices.

Despite this poisonous legacy, researching the potential toxicity of these cultural heritage objects helps us to “reflect on conservation as a cultural technique emerging in Europe in the modern age, alongside technologies aiming to take control over nature, including processes of organic decay” (Arndt, 2022, p. 289 see also section 3.3). Poisoned cultural heritage objects offer a powerful motivation to call into question long-standing attitudes concerning cultural heritage conservation and preservation. Further, their toxicity unsettlingly illustrates the validity of the new materialist concepts of thing-power and assemblages; “[toxicity] widens the idea of the ‘object’ as an entity with stable ontological characteristics. Toxicity, as a relational category, articulates the artifact with its environment, and brings fixed classifications into movement” (Arndt, 2022, p. 285). Reflecting on toxicity encourages a poignant if painful recognition of relationality within cultural heritage collections. Even as they may be isolated in storage boxes and display cases, objects continue to change and to interact with other things—including human things—in a variety of ways.

4.3 Archival Assemblages

While many observations in this section may be applicable to cultural heritage objects and collections in a broad sense, the section narrows the focus to applications of new materialism to archives. In particular, this section takes up Bennett’s concept of the assemblage as a way to think about the ways in which
archival “things” are necessarily parts of a larger networks. As discussed in section 4.1, Bennett deploys the concept of the assemblage to compensate for the unintended limitations of the concept of “thing-power,” which may unintentionally promote thinking about a thing as distinct from other things. Yet even a single “atomistic” item within a larger archival collection is (like all things) necessarily part of an assemblage. A single photograph in an archival collection could be considered, for example, as an assemblage, as it is related to other items in an archival collection, to the whole archive, and to items in other archives. The single photograph reflects networks of people, from those pictured in the photograph, to the original creator(s) of the photograph, to those who stored or displayed the photograph in the intervening years, to the archivists who entered the photograph into the archive, to the archivists who handled the photograph for various purposes after initial archival acquisition, to the conservator who treated the photograph for mold damage, to researchers who may have accessed the photograph, to this author who handled and digitally imaged the photograph. Further, the photograph is made up of an assemblage of materials, such as paper, emulsion, and chemicals as well as accretions like ink, rust, and mold stains. The photograph is in a box, on a shelf next to other boxes in the same collection, in a row of shelves containing other collections in the KvinnSam archive, in a locked and climate-controlled room containing the items considered the rarest and most valuable in the Gothenburg University Library Special Collections. Bennett’s concept of assemblages encourages consideration of these various archival participants, as it encourages us to consider the photograph not only as a separate object, but one that is part of a “swarm of vitalities” (Bennett, 2010, p. 32). Thing-power and the related concept of the assemblage further underscore the importance of taking seriously the interactions between humans and things (Bennett, 2010; Mida, 2019). These concepts will be especially vital for the analysis in section 6.4.

While Bennett does not explicitly cite feminist epistemologies or the feminist ethic of care in her development of new materialism, feminist perspectives resonate with, and some have explicitly taken up, new materialist ideas (Dussel, 2020). The attentiveness to (archival) assemblages resonates with the feminist ethic of care, which can be a beneficial approach to digital humanities as well as archives. Digital humanities scholar Bethany Nowviskie has proposed the use of the feminist ethic and praxis of care as a framework for the digital humanities. She writes that the ethic and praxis of care promotes “a humanistic appreciation of context, interdependence, and vulnerability—of fragile earthly things and their interrelation” (2019, n.p.). For Nowviskie, the concept of engrossment is a means by which the feminist ethic of care may be deployed in the field of digital humanities. Nowviskie articulates engrossment as “close attention to and focus on the other that provoke a productive appreciation of the standpoint or position of the cared-for person or group—or (I would say) of the qualities and affordances of an artifact, document, collection, or system requiring study or curation” (2019, n.p.). In this way, engrossment is potent concept through which to consider the relation between thing-power and assemblages within the archive. Attending closely to a particular archival thing should spur consideration of the individuals, communities, structures, materials, and systems of which that thing is a part.
As noted in section 3.3, damaged cultural heritage has increasingly been recognized for its relational qualities; that is, damaged cultural heritage, perhaps more than undamaged cultural heritage, may affect engagement by powerfully affecting those who engage with these damaged things. Webmoor argues that “To engage with ruins is to relate to them; to care for the objects, nonhumans and life-fellows that inhabit them. Care carries the imperative to manifest carefully. Replete with materials, we must develop object-oriented metrologies responsive to things-themselves…” (Webmoor, 2014, p. 482). While this theoretical approach may be applied to all archival things, damaged archival things can be especially engrossing, stimulating reflections on their powers and places within archival assemblages. DeSilvey notes that “In the past few decades, theoretical approaches that locate the identity of an object in its fixed material form have given way to more complex notions of object identification as a mutable and contingent process. Most recently, work has focused attention on the way that objects themselves can be understood as ‘processual events,’ continually formed and transformed by their movement through a field of social and physical relations” (p. 29). While noting that most cultural heritage scholars aim to arrest decay, DeSilvey, building on Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project and Hell and Schönle’s Ruins of Modernity, argues that decay offers up powerful opportunities for “certain kinds of remembrance despite (because of?) its destructive energies” (DeSilvey, 2017, p. 32-33).

That Bennett’s encounter with debris in a storm drain that inspired her concept of thing-power is not, I think, incidental, but essential. Damage and decay demand considerations of the temporality, relationality, and history of objects. While Bennett articulates this concept really only as it relates to physical things, with the widespread development of digitized cultural heritage assets (see 3.2), considering whether or how thing-power can productively enter the digital realm is of vital importance.

4.4 Digital Thing-Power

The digital is certainly material, and recent scholarship has worked to underscore the physical and environmental dependencies and demands of digital technologies (see section 3.4). Yet the digital is often imagined and experienced as immaterial. Naming conventions such as “the cloud” encourage these kinds of immaterial conceptions (Geismar, 2018; Gonzalez Monserrate, 2022), as do conventional perceptions of the unique features of the digital world in contrast with the physical world, which contribute to the “weirdness of the digital medium” (Jeffrey, 2015). Parikka offers a nuanced view of what, building on the work of Michael Serres, he calls “the weird materialities of contemporary technological culture—weird in the sense that they remain irreducible to either their ‘hard’ contexts and pollution (CO2, toxic materials, minerals, and other component parts) or to their ‘soft’ bits (signs, meanings, attractions, desires)” (Parikka, 2012, p. 97). Parikka wishes to stress the important continuum between the two, developing a theory of what he calls “process power” which he sees as an important aspect of Bennett’s “thing-power” (Parikka, 2012, p. 97, see also sections 3.4 and 4.1). In this way, the continuum between the hard and soft bits of the digital allows for the recognition of thing-
power in the digital realm, not only in the purely physical realms of the storm drain or the physical archive.

When considering the digitization of cultural heritage, some scholars increasingly recognize and theorize the interactions between the physical and digital when developing and interacting with digital resources, with some “exploring digital heritage objects as both an assemblage of methods and site of ethnographic encounter” (Ireland & Bell, 2021, p. 150). These theoretical approaches seriously consider the affordances of the digital for generating affective experiences with and through digitized cultural heritage (Ireland & Bell, 2021; Geismar, 2015; Geismar, 2018). Stuart Jeffrey has argued that “We need to understand and embrace the potential for digital objects to manifest, or accrue, auratic qualities” (Jeffrey, 2015, p. 145). As this can be difficult to conceptualize in the abstract, an example is here helpful to demonstrate the ways that the digital may generate affective experiences, build relationships, and manifest auratic qualities.

Writing on the complex digitization of a Maori cloak held in a London museum, Haidy Geismar draws on both Maori worldviews and contemporary theories of photography and social media to argue that “digital images [instantiate] a complex, social network that forges a powerful experience of co-presence” (2015, p. 305). Geismar applies the Maori word **wairua** meaning “spiritual energy,” to the digital, recognizing the ways in which the digital “exists in waves of information, transmitted all around us…[creating] networks of connectivity, across both space and time” in ways analogous to the spiritual energy of **taonga** (treasured possessions, such as the Maori cloak) (Geismar, 2018, p. 89-90). Geismar reorients understandings of digital objects as “vectors” rather than simply “surrogates” (Ireland & Bell, 2021, p. 153). The complex and careful digitization of the cloak involved engaging communities across space and time; the digitized cloak thus functions, not as a surrogate of the physical cloak, but as a vector of **wairua**. Like the ANARCHIVE project discussed in section 3.1.3, such careful cultivation of digital assets may “build on the relational opportunities associated with new media in order to create novel assemblages that do not so much limit digital information as reassemble it in unforeseen configurations” (Lessard, 2009, p. 317).

While not writing specifically about digital cultural heritage, Marisa Karyl Franz has developed the concept of “haunted intimacy,” which may be another helpful way to consider and cultivate the potential thing-power of digitized cultural heritage objects. Writing on a museum staff’s experiences of ghosts within a historic house museum, she writes that “ghosts exert a personal and relational presence to the material world; hauntings invite the living into an affective and sympathetic relationship to the space and the past” (Franz, 2021, p. 382). Franz sees haunted intimacy as a concept applicable outside of the confines of the house museum, writing “the dead haunt museum collections all over, and when we consider them not as metaphors, but as beings that have demands and desires, our responsibility in stewardship and care shifts to one of relationship-building with the dead” (2021, p. 390). Like a house full of the presences of the living and the dead, cultivating digital thing-power can perhaps provide opportunities for a similar intimacy.
The theoretical approach taken in this thesis thus allows for exploration of the potential thing-power both in the selected damaged physical photographs and in the digital images created. In so doing, it seeks to highlight the ways in which alternative selection criteria and specific digitization approaches can be employed to aid the amplification of thing-power within digitized cultural heritage.

The next chapter outlines the methodological approach taken within this thesis, one which fuses the new materialist theoretical approach detailed in the current chapter with practices of critical digitization and the thick description of cultural heritage objects.
5 Methodology

5.1 Purpose and Aims

This thesis does not aim at a complete or “official” digitization of the damaged IKFF photographs (see section 5.2.5); rather it seeks to experimentally engage an exploratory digitization of damaged cultural heritage materials. This thesis explores the ways in which the theoretical approach of new materialism can inform alternative approaches to the digitization of archival materials. A new materialist approach to digitization informs selection criteria, encouraging the selection of unconventional and unique if commonplace cultural heritage items. It likewise informs the methods employed for the digitization of such cultural heritage.

As noted in Chapter 1, the research questions to which this thesis seeks to respond are as follows:

1. How can new materialist theory inform the selection and description of archival photographs, especially when considering and undertaking digitization?
2. How can damaged cultural heritage objects provide value for archival collections, especially when considering objects for digitization?

In the next section, the method employed for digitization is detailed. Synthesizing the strategies of critical digitization (section 5.2.1) with the method of “thick description” of cultural heritage materials (section 5.2.2) prompted the development of what this thesis will call “weird digitization” (section 5.2.3). This method was used in conjunction with new materialist theory to select, digitize, and analyse the damaged photographs explored in Chapter 6; the benefits and limitations of this method will be addressed in Chapter 7.

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Critical Digitization

This section outlines the method of critical or slow digitization as a foundation for the method employed within this thesis. As noted in section 3.2, digitization of cultural heritage has become increasingly prevalent. While some within the cultural heritage sector push for mass digitization, for example, the digitization of the entire printed record, other valid approaches to digitization have been proposed, especially approaches to deal with materials that are not amenable to the blunt—and sometimes materially destructive—practices of mass digitization, which tend to focus primarily on the digitization of textual content rather than material forms. Alternative methods that have been proposed have been slow digitization (Prescott & Hughes, 2018) or critical digitization (Dahlström, 2010; Dahlström, Hansson & Kjellman, 2012; Dahlström, 2019; Hansson, 2021). While some slight distinctions could be made between these two methods, for the purposes of this thesis, I will primarily make use of the term critical digitization throughout this section.
As deeply connected to the acts of cultural heritage curation and classification, the digitization of cultural heritage is likewise “a knowledge organization practice…and therefore a signifying practice rather than a neutral, unconditional and mechanical one” (Dahlström et al., 2012, p. 457; see also Mak, 2014). Geismar has critiqued the “black-boxing” that often hides “digital mediation” from viewers of digitized cultural heritage (2018, p. 75). The method of critical digitization resists such black-boxing, ideally making apparent the process of digitization for users—or at least documenting the process for internal records and research. Mats Dahlström writes: “That the representation is something different from the source is of course obvious to us, but still something we tend to forget when things turn industrial in scale, which is often the case with library digitization and digital scholarly editing” (2019, p. 202). The recognition of these differences is a key aspect of critical digitization and one that allows recognition of the digital "copy" as a distinct object in its own right. The method of critical digitization seeks to underscore the distinctions and relations between the original document and the digitized one which ideally could allow for deeper considerations of the unique challenges and affordances of both.

To accomplish this, practices of critical digitization—distinct from those of mass digitization—have been developed. Distinguishing critical digitization from mass digitization, Joacim Hansson notes that with critical digitization the “focus is on individual documents or limited collections being reproduced with a high degree of technical proficiency, with the explicit ambition to enhance our knowledge and understanding of the original document” (2021, p. 110). This focus allows for distinctive manual and intellectual processes that mass digitization typically erases through its focus on industrial-scale digitization. Recognizing the scholarly decisions that are made at each stage of the digitization process, from selection to imaging to display (Dahlström, 2019), critical digitization also seeks to clearly document these decisions, developing rigorous metadata as well as creating what some scholars have called paradata (see section 5.2.2).

Compared with the quantitative focus of mass digitization, which tends to focus on large-scale data creation, critical digitization is “qualitative in the sense that it concentrates on what is unique and contingent in the documents” (Dahlström, Hansson, & Kjellman, 2012, p. 463). Critical digitization typically develops “project-specific practices and tools, tailoring them to the quality of the documents in the particular collection.” Thus critical digitization requires attentiveness to the conditions and uniquenesses of the cultural heritage materials which are being digitized in order to develop digitization strategies that are adequate to them. Rather than focusing on documents as simply vessels for content with that content primarily being digitized, critical digitization approaches materials—even textual materials—as “unique and contingent” objects. In this way, the approach “comes closer to the digitization ideal and strategies of a museum” (Dahlström, Hansson, & Kjellman, 2012, p. 464). This makes critical digitization an especially appropriate method for non-textual materials such as the damaged photographs at the heart of this thesis.
5.2.2 Thick Description for Cultural Heritage

The new materialist theory and the applications of such theory to damaged and digitized cultural heritage discussed in previous chapters (see especially Bennett, 2010; DeSilvey, 2017, 2021; Geismar, 2018; LeCain, 2014; Petursdottir & Olsen, 2014) demonstrate a certain qualitative methodological approach, though the method is one that remains, on the whole, implicit. Explaining the method thus requires a close reading of such scholarship in order to unpack the underlying structures and approaches employed. To appropriate a phrase coined by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in the articulation of his ethnographic method (1973), the method of scholars interested in damaged cultural heritage typically involves what may also be described as a kind of “thick description,” albeit in a distinct sense.

Distinct from ethnographic descriptions, these thick descriptions of cultural heritage objects, both physical and digital, seek to meet damaged objects on their own terms, and to describe them as fully as possible. This includes physical descriptions of the objects of interest, from individual parts to larger sites and networks. This method typically describes the networks of actors who currently and previously are known to have interacted with the object at hand. This can include descriptions of humans who created the object, those who interacted with it at various stages of its life, and those who now are in relation to it, for example site managers, curators, conservators, or visitors. Importantly, these descriptions also include the scholar as one of these key actors, with the scholar’s responses to and experiences with the object and its networks often featuring prominently in such thick descriptions. Also typically included are descriptions of various non-human actors that interact with the object, such as animals, insects, molds, plants, water, and fire. These thick descriptions thus consider the various actors that have entered and that continue to enter into relation with the cultural heritage objects under consideration.

Rather than remaining focused solely on the past history of cultural heritage, this methodological approach recognizes how the present influences any analysis of cultural heritage that we may undertake. Focusing on “duration,” the archaeologist Laurent Olivier, has argued that “the present is filled with vestiges of the past” and suggests that “we abandon traditional historiography and root it in another approach that requires us to listen to the distorted echo of the past that lies in our present” (2011, p. 109). Rather than objects that remain in the past, cultural heritage objects have been selected as meaningful within the present, and understanding them fully requires understanding their historical contexts, materiality, and interactions, both past and present (Dussel, 2020, p. 440). Thus the method of thick description for cultural heritage, in considering present interests in and interactions with the objects at hand, writes histories explicitly marked by and for the present.

Because of this, the method of thick description for cultural heritage requires the scholar to possess a certain self-reflexivity as well as a willingness to engage with and share the affective experiences that occur during these relations with cultural heritage objects. As Petursdottir and Olsen have written, “To recognize the otherness of things…requires both cognitive and sensual openness. Essential to such
an attentive attitude is to overcome the imperative of *anaesthetization*…that has burdened modern academia and sciences generally, to make room also for experiences and expressions of *wonder* and affection” (2014, p. 24). The role of affect has been described and performed by a number of other scholars engaging with this cultural heritage method (see DeSilvey, 2017; Geismar, 2018; Introna, 2014). The positive use of affective experiences in this method also seems to encourage the recognition of aesthetic qualities and artistic potentialities for cultural heritage (see Burström, 2013; DeSilvey, 2017; Petursdottir & Olsen, 2014; Petursdottir, 2014). This positive use does not necessarily mean that all experiences are pleasant; it may be the case that engaging with cultural heritage materials results in pain and trauma as much as wonder and affection.

The scholarly self-reflexivity of this methodological approach also dovetails with recent developments in cultural heritage and library classification practices, which increasingly seek to recognize and document the position of cultural heritage scholars and professionals. Scholars of library and cultural heritage classification have long recognized the ways in which classification and the creation of descriptive metadata is not the neutral activity that many have claimed (see, for example, Berman 1993, first published in 1971; Olsen, 2002; Shep, 2016; Wagner, 2022). However, recent approaches to classification have sought to not just recognize but to include the positionality of the classifier within cultural heritage records. This can be accomplished through, for example, documenting paradata, which seeks to “capture…all facets of…project decision making [to expose] its ontological bases and biases” (Shep, 2016, p. 326; see also Huvila, I. et al., 2021); it could also be accomplished through including “positionality statements” in catalog records to require catalogers to document “how their own identities played into their descriptive choices” (Wagner, 2022, p. 641). Ultimately, scholarly self-reflexivity has increasingly been recognized as an important attitude to possess—and to document—when undertaking the study and classification of cultural heritage; the method of thick description outlined in this section can support this imperative.

Considering the intellectual, affective, and personal standpoints that underpin descriptive and classificatory practices, thick description requires cultivating care for things and the assemblages of which they are a part. Thick description of cultural heritage requires and engenders engrossment and is a method that can be fruitfully applied both to both traditional as well as digital cultural heritage. In this way, thick description works well with the theoretical approach of new materialism detailed in Chapter 4.

### 5.2.3 Weird Digitization

Combining the methods of critical digitization (section 5.2.1) and the thick description of cultural heritage (section 5.2.2) with the unique affordances of the digital (see sections 3.4 and 4.4) results in what is here called weird digitization. Weird digitization takes as its starting point a decision to employ atypical selection criteria to cultural heritage objects (in this case ordinary damage) which encourages attentiveness to the unique qualities of the objects and seeks to carry such attentiveness into the digitization process.
The term “weird” has been consciously selected for a number of reasons pertaining to the multiple meanings contained within the term. First, weird, in the informal sense, is often used as a synonym for something strange or unusual. This sense of the word points to the atypical selection criteria that forms the basis of this method. Second, in the narrower sense of the term, weird points to the supernatural, that is, something that is beyond nature and, often, is seen to have some sort of power that can impact the natural realm. As this latter use of the term in the context of cultural heritage digitization is likely rather more provocative than the former, some further discussion is here warranted.

A number of scholars have used the term “weird” when describing the “weird materialities” or simply the “weirdness” of the digital world (Jeffrey, 2015; Parikka, 2012; see also section 4.4) to point to common perceptions of the digital while also pointing to possible unique affordances of the digital. For Parikka, the digital is an “abstraction,” even as it is also, of course, inextricable from the material (2012; see also sections 3.4 and 4.4). This abstract quality enables the digital to act in ways distinct from solely material objects or beings; it has, as Parikka notes, power. While primarily discussing 3D data and cultural heritage visualisation, such Jeffrey’s consideration of the “weirdness” of the digital focuses similarly on such non-solid attributes and powers of the digital, especially attending to the ways in which the digital may, through its unique affordances, allow for the development of a kind of aura in Walter Benjamin’s sense (Jeffrey, 2015; see also section 4.2). Rather than digital objects lacking the aura of the original, Jeffrey argues that digital visualizations can develop their own aura, but only “If we…consider how digital representations actually feel to access, to use and re-use and, significantly, how they make one feel connected to the past emotionally as well as intellectually” (2015, p. 150). The aura of these ideally constructed digital objects exerts a kind of power, one that encourages more meaningful engagements—even engrossments—with history.

The analysis performed in Chapter 6 will thus build upon this methodological foundation, using the methods of critical digitization and thick description in conjunction with the theoretical approach of new materialism to illustrate the potentialities of weird digitization for cultural heritage. Before turning to that analysis, the final sections of this chapter will outline some necessary practicalities: materials, tools, and copyright/ethical considerations.

5.2.4 Materials: Damaged IKFF Photographs

The photographs selected for exploratory digitization are from the IKFF Collection (B36) housed at KvinnSam at the Gothenburg University Humanities Library. The damaged photographs are housed in three archival boxes separately from undamaged photographs. Within those boxes, archivists have grouped some photographs according to general dates (e.g., 1910s) and/or to particular events or places (e.g., Dublin Congress, 1926); these groupings generally are maintained within the boxes with simple acid-free paper folders. In one of the boxes, some photographs have been numbered on the acid-free paper folders (e.g., A2), for internal purposes; this does not appear within the publicly available finding aid.
Most of the damaged photographs in the collection do not have such assigned numbers. Those selected for this project belong to a grouping of photographs stemming from a particular event, the Dublin Congress of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom which took place between July 9th and 15th in 1926. Section 6.1 will provide detail on the selection criteria used when choosing these photographs for this thesis project.

5.2.5 Tools for Exploratory Digitization

It should be noted here that this project did not seek to formally digitize these photographs; currently, all official digitization at the Gothenburg University Library is conducted by the library’s digitization department. While this project could spur the use of these informally collected digitized images as a digital exhibit or motivate the creation of new “official” digitized images for inclusion within Alvin, those were not the primary purpose of the exploratory digitization conducted for this thesis project. Instead, digitization was conducted for internal purposes for KvinnSam, such as recording condition, as well as experimenting with the method of weird digitization laid out in this thesis. The advantages of and limitations to this exploratory approach will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

The tools used for exploratory digitization included an Epson flatbed scanner provided by KvinnSam as well as a personal iPhone 12 camera. With the flatbed scanner, files were saved in TIFF format; with the iPhone camera files were saved in HEIC and JPEG formats. Though the photographs under consideration are all black-and-white prints, full colour images were created in order to fully capture variations such as photographic processing techniques (e.g., those using more sepia tones), fading and discoloration, mold, rust, and ink.

5.2.6 Copyright and Ethical Considerations

Ultimately, access to and digitization of these materials is overseen by KvinnSam and the Gothenburg University Library, with the IKFF donating these materials to the collection in the 1990s for the purposes of preservation and access. As the photographs selected for this project are nearly a century old, copyright has been considered largely a non-issue.

While the types of photographs digitized and analysed vary somewhat (for example, some photographs are posed, while others are candid shots), all of the photographs under consideration contain images of human subjects. People within the images all appear to be adults; some of the photographs are explicitly posed with subjects likely wishing to document their participation in the Dublin Congress as a major event for the WILPF, creating little ethical concern over consent. It should be noted, however, that the IKFF collection does contain other photographs where ethical considerations may need to be handled with more caution as, for example, images of children taken during the WILPF’s “missionary”-style work in the early twentieth century. Scott McQuire has written “that the ethical responsibility of the photographer towards those being photographed must be complemented by the ethical responsibility of viewers to actively read images in a manner that goes
beyond mere formalism” (McQuire, 2013, p. 228); with weird digitization, this thesis seeks to encourage more ethical viewing of these photographs.

Having outlined the necessary material and ethical practicalities and having clarified the central theoretical and methodological approaches in this and the previous chapter, the next chapter will provide a practical illustration of these approaches and their application to the damaged IKFF photographs earlier introduced.
6 Analysis

This chapter examines the selected IKFF Collection photographs, exploring their history, materiality, and interactions, past and present, in both their physical and digitized forms. These photographs are used as exemplars of a new materialist approach to the digitization of cultural heritage, which will be demonstrated within this analysis (Research Question 1). The value that such an approach may provide, particularly when considering the selection and digitization of damaged cultural heritage objects (Research Question 2), will be assessed in Chapter 7.

In the analysis undertaken, the following structure will be used to apply the methods of critical digitization and thick description resulting in the weird digitization of the photographs at hand. First, “Selection” (6.1) briefly focuses on the rationale for engaging with the particular photographs chosen for analysis. This includes the researcher’s positionality as part of the selection process (see section 5.2.3). Second, “Contexts and Histories” (6.2) describes the historical contexts for the photographs, focusing especially on the history of the 1926 Dublin WILPF Congress in order to better contextualize the subjects depicted in the photographs. Third, “Images and Materials” (6.3) focuses on the materiality of the photographs, both in their damaged physical forms as well as their digitized forms. Fourth, “Encounters and Assemblages” (6.4) demonstrates the larger networks in which these photographs have and continue to take part. Digitized images of the selected photographs will be interspersed throughout the chapter to demonstrate the basis for the various analytical choices set forth. Of course, as shown with the theoretical concept of the assemblage, these categories are not always easy to separate; lines drawn between the topics and themes of these sections are, to some extent, artificial and necessitated by the need to write a reasonably readable and ultimately assessable thesis. Section 6.4 concludes by briefly summarizing the analysis as a whole, focusing particularly on the ways in which these categories of analysis can and do bleed into one another.

6.1 Selection

Before analysing the selected photographs, a brief discussion of how and why these damaged photographs were selected for exploratory digitization is apt. I was first made aware of the collection of damaged IKFF photographs by one of KvinnSam’s archivists; thus my initial exposure to these photographs was initiated through archivist interest in attending to these materials. I was given the opportunity to look through the boxes of damaged IKFF photographs in their entirety, but ultimately chose to focus on photographs from one particular grouping, the Dublin Congress 1926 photographs (see section 5.2.4). Practically, the age and content of these photographs limited ethical and copyright considerations (see section 5.2.6), which also facilitated their selection.

Focusing on one grouping of photographs, taken at a specific historical event, allowed for the deeper historical contextualization which will be integrated into the analysis (see section 6.2 below). This grouping, the Dublin Congress 1926 photographs, had been indicated by archivists as “unique,” meaning that there were
not additional copies of these photographs located elsewhere in the KvinnSam collection. Further, searches and inquiries made by this researcher to other WILPF archives, including the largest collection of historical WILPF materials, now housed at the Rare and Distinctive Collections Repository at the University of Colorado Boulder Libraries, did not result in the location of any similar images. The Dublin Congress photographs within the UC Boulder collection were limited to three prints, none of which contained the same subject matter as those in the IKFF Collection at KvinnSam. While other important scholarly possibilities may certainly derive from digitizing photographic copies in varying locations and in varying conditions, the uniqueness of content when combined with the uniqueness of damage provided a compelling argument for selection in the context of this thesis project.

Other considerations that determined the selection of photographs included the range of severe damage within this grouping, exhibiting many different kind of material issues and concerns. Because of the severely damaged condition of these photographs, it is unlikely that most historical researchers would be allowed access to them, as frequent handling could contribute to additional damage. Thus digitization in this case could serve to assist preservation, both by limiting handling by users as well as by documenting the current states of these photographs in digital detail (see section 3.2). It can also create digital access to content that otherwise would be inaccessible to researchers, though of course digital access remains distinct from physical access.

The varied damage within this grouping also allows for a broader discussion of the affective and aesthetic possibilities of damage (see sections 3.3, 5.2.2, and 7.1). The small grouping of photographs provides an enormous range of damage, from rust stains and accretions, ink markings, mold, emulsion and paper loss, water damage, and earlier attempts at recording metadata. The combination of these many selection considerations encouraged engrossment with these photographs even more so than other groupings within the collection.

Yet, as noted earlier, classification and selection are never objective and neutral endeavours; this grouping of photographs may not necessarily prove as engrossing for all researchers as for this one. As noted in 5.2.2, scholarly self-reflexivity is vital to possess. While such self-reflexivity will arise within the analysis and discussion that follows, a brief discussion of this researcher’s scholarly history can provide also provide some important contextualization for the selection of these photographs over other materials within the IKFF or broader KvinnSam collections.

Prior to my engagement with digital humanities, I worked in the more “traditional” humanities, researching the history of religions with a focus on unconventional late nineteenth and early twentieth century religions in the United States. One of many the “unconventional” components of the religions I previously researched is their connections to women’s rights more broadly and the women’s suffrage movement more specifically. When encountering these photographs, I therefore had some prior knowledge of and interest in women’s peace movements and organizations that preceded the establishment of the WILPF. My positionality—beyond simply my scholarly one—will, of course, influence the weird digitization undertaken here,
especially the descriptive choices that follow. My personal aesthetic tastes include finding beauty in dead trees, artworks that look like they have been dragged through mud, and in brokenness which has also certainly played a role in my selection of this project and these photographs.

Below, I include the digital images of the four photographs selected for analysis from the larger grouping of ten damaged Dublin Congress photographs in KvinnSam’s IKFF Collection. As the individual photographs have not been systematically numbered by KvinnSam, for the purposes of saving the digital tiff files in a systematic way as well as creating condition reports for these photographs as a whole, I used the following convention: B36 (indicating the archival collection as a whole) Sk (“Skadad” or “damaged” in Swedish, as noted on the archival box of which they are a part), 1926 (the year the photographs were first taken, though it should be noted this is not necessarily the same year all prints of these photographs were made), Dublin (abbreviating Dublin Congress), number (1-10, in the order in which they appeared within the paper folder within the archival box the first time I examined them), and finally B or F (for backsida/framsida in Swedish, back/front in English). This numbering convention was also employed for the condition reports that were generated for the photographs.

For ease within the analysis and discussion, however, I will simply indicate the photographs by the specific numbers I assigned them, as the preceding information remains the same for all photographs here examined. The photographs selected are Photograph 2 (Figure 2); Photograph 6 (Figure 3); Photograph 7 (Figure 4); and Photograph 10 (Figure 5). To give a sense of the overall appearance of the photographs, I first provide the digital images of the photographs showing the front (or image) sides (Figures 2-5). In the sections that follow, additional digital images of these photographs, either from zoomed in screenshots of the tiff files or from detailed images taken from alternative angles with an iPhone camera will be included to illustrate key components of the analysis.

These four photographs will be explored in detail in the remainder of this chapter to illustrate the potential of weird digitization for cultural heritage objects. For ease, when discussing the photographs in the analysis below, I will refer to them primarily by numbers I assigned to them, for example Photograph 7 or Photograph 10, with the captions of the figures drawing attention to any additional necessary details of note.
Figure 2. Photograph 2. IKFF Collection, B36, KvinnSam, Gothenburg University Library.

Figure 3. Photograph 6. IKFF Collection, B36, KvinnSam, Gothenburg University Library.
Figure 4. Photograph 7. IKFF Collection, B36, KvinnSam, Gothenburg University Library.

Figure 5. Photograph 10. IKFF Collection, B36, KvinnSam, Gothenburg University Library.
6.2 Contexts and Histories

The photographs under consideration were taken at the WILPF Dublin Congress of 1926; they were collected in the Swedish section’s archives at some point in the decades that followed, which were then incorporated into KvinnSam’s archive in the 1990s. Close examination of the content of these photographs encourages historical exploration of the Dublin Congress as well as the ways in which this reading of that history is shaped by our position in the present. The archaeologist Laurent Olivier writes that “Not only are artifacts discovered in our present, but, above all, the meaning we attribute to them is shaped by their relation to our present” (2011, p. 97). The historical analysis that follows, therefore, is certainly so informed. This section seeks to more thoroughly identify the historical contexts for these photographs paying attention to how their material damages as well as the process of digitization may motivate and assist such historical exploration.

The 1926 Dublin Congress does not seem to have not been as thoroughly researched by scholars as some other periods of WILPF’s history, thus the bulk of analysis that follows draws upon the Congress Proceedings, a document published by WILPF to provide an overview of the Congress to its members. The lack of scholarly attention to the Dublin Congress may be due to the fact that it was held in what is sometimes seen as the relative calm between the two World Wars. During this period, women were also granted the right to vote in the United States, Canada, and many European countries—whose citizens made up the bulk of the delegates to the Dublin Congress. This meant that the WILPF began to shift its focus from the staunch feminism of its earlier years to “concentrat[ing] on its work with the League of Nations, sending missions to trouble spots around the world and developing its own theory and practice of nonviolence” during this period (Foster, 1989, p. 18). Thus, this Congress may not immediately appear as interesting as the work of the WILPF in its earlier years with World War I still raging and with women still fighting to gain voting rights or in the years that would follow when struggling through World War II. Yet the year of the Dublin Congress was one in which the WILPF was already aware of and concerned about many developments that would ultimately contribute to the enormous violence of World War II that was to come.

As noted in 2.2, the WILPF established regular congresses, typically held every three years, where representatives from the various international chapters would meet to discuss the latest findings concerning issues of war and peace, to develop strategies for advocating for peace to local governments and international forums like the League of Nations, and to further working relations between individual members and national sections.

The Dublin Congress of 1926 was held between July 9th to 15th, taking place primarily in Dublin, Ireland, with some additional recreational activities into the surrounding countryside. The days of the Dublin Congress were filled with speeches, committee meetings, resolutions, teas, receptions, and excursions. The photographs in the IKFF collection display Congress attendees at some of these events. The choice of Dublin as a location for the Congress was, perhaps, ideologically as well as logistically purposeful. The Congress Proceedings stated
that “The great thing about the Dublin Congress was that it brought folks together. Ireland, torn by War with Britain and then by civil strife, turned pacifist for the moment” (WILPF, 1926, p. 1). This “moment” of pacifism, seen from the perspective of the present, knowing the many conflicts, both international and within Ireland, that would continue to occur in the decades since the Congress, is perhaps even more striking from our present vantage.

The primary work of the Congress was overseen by three main “Commissions” who worked throughout the Congress in the following areas: “Colonial and Economic Imperialism,” “Arbitration and Disarmament versus Militarism,” and “Relations between Majorities and Minorities” (WILPF, 1926, p. 1-2). In light of the atrocities against Jewish and other minorities that would occur in the decades to follow, the work of the “Relations between Majorities and Minorities” is particularly salient when considering the Congress today; though in some cases, the assumption by some delegates (such as one from Sweden), that these were not pressing issues for their own nations can read rather chillingly from this same perspective, especially considering what is now known about the appalling attempts to “assimilate” indigenous peoples in Sweden during this decade. The Congress also saw presentations from a number of additional “standing commissions” who reported on wide-ranging topics from the International Day of Peace to the extremely concerning developments of chemical weapons of which some delegates, including the chemist and WILPF member Gertrude Woker, were at the time speaking out strongly against (Woker, [before 1927]). From the position of this researcher in 2023, many of the topics taken up at the 1926 Dublin Congress thus appear—often depressingly—still relevant.

According to the Proceedings, the bulk of the meetings were held in the National University with the exception of “the public mass meeting” which was held elsewhere (WILPF, 1926, p. 2). Photograph 6 (Figure 3), as a photograph of a seemingly smaller gathering of WILPF delegates and Congress participants, was thus likely to have been taken in a meeting room at the National University. In the photograph, the room appears quite dark, though the darkness could in part be due to the damaged condition of the photograph. A few dozen individuals, mostly women, are seated in chairs facing tables and podiums that appear on at the front of the room, or on the right-hand side of the photograph. Two women, likely the speakers at the session during which this photograph would have been taken, stand next to the podiums. The photograph does not seem to have captured the entire audience, the entire room, as the left-hand edge of the photograph indicates the presence of at least some additional audience members, with partial faces, arms, and shoulders visible. While some faces are blurred due to movement, the photograph was posed, with most subjects looking at or at least generally facing the camera.

Perhaps to balance the exceedingly difficult discussions and reports of conflicts, of rising antisemitism and violence against other minorities elsewhere in Europe, of chemical weapons developments, and of colonial and economic imperialism, the Congress Proceedings note several “social entertainments” such as afternoon teas and excursions, between the morning meetings and evening public meetings and plenary sessions. These social amusements could also serve to develop stronger
relationships and foster collaborations between delegates and other Congress participants.

Photograph 2 (Figure 2) was taken at one of these afternoon social entertainments. It depicts Congress participants milling about in front of a castle. This photograph was taken at a garden party at Killeen Castle, located in the countryside to the northwest of Dublin. The party was hosted by Lord and Lady Killeen with the location and host’s names indicated in a handwritten ink note on the back of the photograph. The Proceedings briefly mention this party as being hosted on the first afternoon of the Congress, which would have been Friday, July the 9th (WILPF, 1926, p. 4). The photograph depicts about two dozen guests, primarily women, with some figures obscured due to damage on the left-hand side of the photograph. The photograph is a candid shot, with no one seeming to take note of the photographer; instead, several small groups are seen standing around engaged in conversations in the courtyard near the castle, with one group standing in the entrance to the castle.

Photographs 7 (Figure 4) and 10 (Figure 5) depict Congress delegates on another afternoon excursion, likely the excursion described in the Proceedings as follows:

“Wednesday afternoon brought a very interesting excursion to Boyne Valley. This trip was arranged by the Republican Women’s Entertainment Committee. We were given the opportunity of seeing the most ancient and famous of Ireland’s prehistorical monuments, the tumuli at Newgrange and Dowth, underground temples of a forgotten religion dating back many centuries before the Christian era” (WILPF, 1926, p. 5).

Concluding that these photographs both depict this particular excursion, distinct from several others mentioned in the proceedings, comes from the presence of a standing stone in Photograph 7 (see Figures 4 and 6) around which a group of seventeen women and two men pose. One woman is almost entirely obscured behind the stone, while two others are almost entirely obscured by women standing in front of them.
Figure 6. Photograph 7, slightly zoomed in screenshot of tiff file to better highlight human subjects.

Photograph 10 (Figures 5 and 7) shows some members of the group standing upon and others walking down a hill, which could be one of the tumuli (burial mounds) mentioned in the Proceedings. At least one figure is almost entirely obscured due to extensive mold damage on the right-half of the photograph, increasing in severity from left to right.
While the photographs could have been taken on different excursions on different days, it seems likely that they were taken during same excursion due to similarities between the clothing worn and the fact that many of the same individuals seem to appear in both photographs. In Photograph 7, for example, two of the women standing to the right of the standing stone appear to be wearing the same distinct articles clothing as appears in Photograph 10. In Photograph 7 (see Figures 4 and 6), the women appear to the right of the standing stone, with one wearing a dark coat open over a dark dress with a distinctive geometric pattern around the waist and hips as well as a dark hat with a darker wide band; the other woman—whose image is now significantly obscured by mold damage—wears a dark coat with a more flowing and light-coloured scarf and dress as well as a light-coloured hat with a distinctive and more decorative band. A zoomed-in screenshot of the original digital tiff image appears below to show these details more closely (see Figure 8).
Though the specific decorations are somewhat difficult to discern, they are visible enough to recognize them appearing again in Photograph 10 as the same two women walk down the hill (or tumulus) towards the right-hand side of the photograph as can be seen in a highly zoomed-in view of this photograph (Figure 9). In this photograph, the women’s positions in relation to each other and to the extensive mold damage is reversed. Now it is the woman in the dark dress with the pattern who is rendered almost invisible due to the even more significant mold damage on the right-hand side of the photograph. The pattern of the dress appears in the midst
of the large blooms of mold. The woman in the light hat and dress is here more visible, with the distinct if fuzzy decoration of her hat appearing as in Photograph 7.

Figure 9. Photograph 10, highly zoomed-in screenshot of tiff file.
Close examination of the photographic images to establish their specific historical contexts can be helpful in verifying existing assumptions about these photographs; it could also encourage further historical research into less explored aspects of the Congress such as the excursions, considering how they too might have helped to shape delegates’ experiences of the Congress beyond the official slate of lectures, reports, and more formal activism.

The obscured figures in a number of these Dublin Congress photographs due to damage such as areas of emulsion loss and mold especially in areas in which humans were clearly once pictured can draw attention to many other historical absences within the photographs. It is certainly the case that many WILPF members may have found the cost of travel and attendance to such congresses untenable. It was clearly the case that there were more delegates from Ireland and Great Britain, who resided in closer proximity Dublin, in attendance than from further flung nations; delegates from wealthier nations also seem to have been more numerous. The Proceedings noted that representatives from twenty countries were present, with some having more than a dozen (the “full quota” for participation from any one country was 30, with Great Britain and Ireland reaching that quota).

The Proceedings also noted that “Unfortunately our delegates from the Ukraine and Italy who expected to come were unable to get passports from their governments” (WILPF, 1926, p. 1). While the absences of the Ukrainian and Italian delegates largely seem to have been mentioned briefly in the proceedings as an inconvenience and a disappointment, one wonders whether these absences were discussed more extensively at the Congress outside of the official records. The bureaucracies of acquiring identification papers and visas, the challenges of international border crossings, and the generally restricted movement of peoples were in fact pressing concerns that the WILPF had sought to bring attention to throughout the 1920s. Lobbying the League of nations to take the thorny issue of “statelessness” seriously, the WILPF sought social justice for those left “stateless” following the end of WWI and “to challenge the dominant domain of sovereign state discourse” (Cochran, 2023, p. 10). Azoulay claims that borders and nation-states are “institutional forms of imperial violence” (p. 286); a statement view which likely would have been embraced by many WILPF members during this period. The artifactual absences caused by damage to the photographs thus may serve to draw attention not only to actual absences at the Dublin Congress, but also can underscore the broader activist activities of the WILPF during this period.

Despite appearances, these photographs have been treated with great care, and continue to be treated with care, though historical gaps in such care have resulted in their current conditions. As has been shown, however, it is those conditions that can help to draw attention to their histories in compelling ways. Their material conditions also point to their lives as objects which continue after their initial creation. These material lives will be considered more fully in the following section.
6.3 Images and Materials

This section describes the material conditions of the photographs as a way to derive meaning from their damages and from their persistence as cultural heritage objects. When turning to the material conditions of these photographic materials, I should note at the outset the limitations of my expertise when approaching the materiality of these photographs. In *Curated Decay*, Caitlin DeSilvey writes that “In my desire to be as precise as possible about the processes I observe at work, I am often forced to draw on bodies of knowledge that are outside my expertise—ecology, chemistry, materials science. I may risk failure or misinterpretation, but I seek reassurance in the awareness that potent moments always involve some form of perplexity, a recognition that forces beyond my ken are at work and that all I can do is describe what I see within the limits of my understanding” (2017, p. 7). While my background is similarly not that of a conservator or materials scientist who would have more intimate knowledge of the biological and chemical processes that are at work within these damages, describing these damages from a more general observational standpoint is an attempt to render their damage meaningful as potent vectors of thing-power as well as to consider their natures as material assemblages (see Chapter 4). The larger archival assemblages of which they are a part (see section 4.3) will be explored more deeply in section 6.4.

While as noted, my expertise is certainly not that of a cultural heritage conservator, I had the benefit of examining some of these photographs with the cultural heritage conservator of the Gothenburg University Library one afternoon in February 2023; her perspectives as a conservator as well as her experience performing the mold remediation on the damaged IKFF photographs, including the Dublin Congress photographs under closer consideration have been invaluable as an entry point into some aspects of their materiality as well as providing an expert opinion on the condition reports that I generated for these photographs for KvinnSam’s records. To gain additional knowledge concerning description of the content and material qualities of photographs, in February 2023, I completed an online course “Describing Photographs for the Online Collection” offered by Library Juice Academy (Library Juice Academy, n.d.).

The damaged IKFF photographs likely arrived to the KvinnSam archive with the condition issues that led to their current state. As they were identified as damaged, they were kept separately from other photographs within the collection, but as such were then likely somewhat overlooked within the archive due to many other pressing archival needs, such as the acquisition of new materials in need of attention, the need to tend to other more highly used and requested materials, and the like. KvinnSam has also not always had as large a staff as it currently does with periods when archival roles were especially underfunded (see section 2.1). This has fortunately changed in recent years with additional staff dedicated to the archival materials, with even more KvinnSam and Gothenburg University Library staff in the past few years participating in “sprint weeks” where those who have the time to do so engage with sections of the archive to monitor and organize archival materials. These sprint weeks were motivated in part due to plans for a newly constructed library which would necessitate the entire archival collection being moved to the
new structure. While these building plans are currently unclear or on hold, the sprint weeks have continued as they provide additional benefits to the collection beyond simply those of organizing materials for their movement to a new facility.

When the condition of the damaged photographs was (re)discovered in 2020, a mold remediation was undertaken by the University Library conservator. This remediation consisted of dry cleaning which aims at minimizing the spread of mold as well as minimizing “detrimental health effects to users” of the materials (Photographic Materials Group, 2024). This process involves careful brushing and vacuuming with appropriate tools to reduce the amount of mold. The climate-controlled conditions in which the materials are kept within the archive should then prevent new mold from forming. Other practices involve keeping the mold remediated photographs in separate boxes and folders to prevent the possibility of contamination to other archival materials (Photographic Materials Group, 2024). Other more toxic and potentially materially detrimental remediations were not undertaken for these photographs, as stabilizing them was the primary goal, and could be achieved without these other more harmful methods.

Other types of damage apparent in these photographs pertain image and material loss. With areas of complete loss, a part of the photograph is missing, from the emulsion layer through to the paper base, as for example, the missing upper corners seen in Photographs 6 (see Figure 3), the missing lower corner of Photograph 10 (see Figure 5), or the larger missing section seen on the left-hand side of Photograph 2 (see Figures 2 and 10). Emulsion loss refers to areas of the photograph where the emulsion has separated from the paper support and is now entirely missing. Emulsion flaking or curling refers to cases where the emulsion has separated from the underlying paper support but remains attached—if tenuously—to the photographic base (or to other areas of emulsion that remain adhered to the photographic base).

This issue can be seen most severely in Photograph 2 (see Figure 10). In the photographs in the IKFF collection, emulsion flaking and curling generally designates them as the most “unstable,” that is, the most at risk of damage due to handling. Photographs with areas of total loss that is not linked to continued emulsion issues elsewhere may be fairly stable to handle. Conservators could potentially repair emulsion flaking through careful re-adherence of the emulsion to the paper base. In the absence of such laborious remediation, handling—including handling for digitization—needs to be undertaken most carefully in order to prevent additional emulsion loss.

Less extreme forms of damage—which could in fact be viewed as fairly significant forms of photographic damage were it not for the extreme damage of the photographs in question—including curling, buckling, silvering, fading, and discoloration. Depending on the severity of these issues, they may also make images difficult to discern.

Photograph 2 provides the clearest example of significant emulsion issues leading to a designation of instability in the condition report generated (see Figures 10, 11, and
Photograph 2 also contains an area of complete loss, with a rather large area of the photograph along the left-hand side missing in addition to the highly unstable areas of emulsion loss and emulsion curling and flaking (see Figure 10). With digital images taken from above, the texture and severity of the flaking may be somewhat difficult to discern, even when zooming in. Digital images captured from the edges of the photograph can demonstrate the severity of these issues more clearly (see Figures 11 and 12).

Figure 10. Photograph 2. Detail of upper left-hand edge showing emulsion separation, flaking, and curling with areas of emulsion loss as well as the large area of total loss (base and emulsion).
Figure 11. Photograph 2. Close-up image of emulsion separation, flaking and curling, with areas of loss, taken from the left-hand edge.

Figure 12. Photograph 2. Close-up image of upper left-hand corner taken from the left edge showing emulsion separation, flaking, and curling with areas of loss.
Photograph 6 (Figures 3 and 13) demonstrates a unique combination of damage caused by rust staining and rust adherence to the emulsion in combination with areas of loss, scratches, and water damage.

Figure 13. Photograph 6. Close-up image of upper left-hand corner showing area of complete loss, emulsion loss, silvering, water and rust damage caused by a paperclip, with significant rust adhered to the emulsion layer of the photograph.

Like the emulsion flaking issues, digitizing the photograph from the edge rather than from above can provide a better sense of the textural issues that result from the varied damages at work in this photograph, with buckling, curling, and rust accretions made clearer from this angle (Figure 14). The rust accretions and staining have been caused by a now-absent paperclip, often the bane of archivists; while earlier collectors of these materials, like the IKFF, saw the use of metal paperclips
as helpfully linking related materials, these obviously have the capacity for damaging materials and are now typically removed and avoided.

Figure 14. Photograph 6. Close-up image of upper left-hand corner taken from the upper-left hand edge showing area of complete loss, emulsion loss, buckling, curling, and rust damage, with significant rust accretion.

Of the Dublin Congress photographs under consideration in this thesis, photographs 7 and 10 demonstrate the clearest and most extreme examples of mold damage, with extensive spotting and image loss as a result of past overgrowths of mold. Photograph 10 offers perhaps the most extravagant examples of mold damage in combination with areas of emulsion loss through scratches, adherence to, and/or abrasion with other surfaces. In the detailed digital image (Figure 15), the mold blooms appear three dimensional in the digital image, almost cloud-like, though this is something of a digital distortion.
Figure 15. Photograph 10, highly zoomed-in screenshot of tiff file to highlight mold blooms.

Photograph 10 also has a significant area of complete loss with several square centimeters of the lower right corner missing (Figure 16). This piece, as it turns out can be found strongly adhered to the lower right-hand corner of Photograph 7 (Figure 17) which will be discussed further below.

Figure 16. Photograph 10, highly zoomed-in screenshot of tiff file showing mold damage surrounding an area of complete loss to the lower right corner.
The mold damage in photograph 7 shares a similarity with that in photograph 10 along the top right edge of the photograph, but more apparent in this photograph is also the black spotting caused by mold spores throughout the right-hand side of the photograph (Figure 17). The photographic print in question was never trimmed, with the grid marks and crooked borders of the uncut print visible. In this case, remaining in this uncut state meant that less of the image content has been lost to mold on the right-hand side than might have been had the image extended to the edge of the print.

Figure 17. Photograph 7. Detail of upper right corner showing the grid-marks of the uncut print, ink stain, paper accretion, and intense mold damage and staining.

As noted in section 6.2, the images contained in Photograph 7 and Photograph 10 were likely taken during the same excursion to the Irish countryside, though due to significant differences in paper stock and photographic printing methods, the photographs were likely printed in significantly different time periods. Photograph 10 was likely the much earlier printing due to the paper stock and development process used with Photograph 7 likely dating from decades later.

Yet besides the historical connection in terms of their image content, the photographs are also connected materially through their damages. The placement of the mold damage on the right-hand sides of both indicate that they were likely stored together, stacked one on top of the other, with the water and mold damage likely affecting both at the same time. This assumption about their past storage is made a certainty when recognizing that the lower right-hand corner of Photograph 7
includes a large accretion of paper and emulsion (Figure 18) which is the lost corner of Photograph 10 (Figure 16).

Figure 18. Photograph 7. Detail of lower right corner showing the grid-marks of the uncut print, ink stain, intense mold staining as well as the lower right corner of Photograph 10 adhered to the lower right corner of this photograph.

Digitizing these two images together rather than only separately as is typically the case when digitizing cultural heritage objects, can draw attention to the historical and material interconnections the photographs share (Figure 19).
Figure 19. Photographs 7 and 10, with the two photographs digitized together to show the adherence of the lost bottom right corner of Photograph 10 to the bottom right corner of Photograph 7.

The many material damages whether to individual photographs or, as in Photographs 7 and 10, damages occurring in tandem, demonstrate well the ways in which these photographs are “things” in Bennett’s sense, which continue to have lives, and to interact with a variety of other beings and other things. In the next section investigates the ways that selection and digitization of these photographs helps to demonstrate their place within larger networks or assemblages.
6.4 Encounters and Assemblages

While the fact that these photographic things are assemblages can, of course, be recognized within the confines of the borders of the photographs themselves, an exploration of the networks of people who encounter these photographs as well as the places in which these photographs now exist helps to further demonstrate their reality as assemblages, especially in relation to human actors.

These unassuming—and seemingly unfortunate—photographs now share the climate-controlled air with Gothenburg University Library’s greatest “treasures”: ancient codices, rare first editions, the handwritten manuscripts of famous authors. This room, where the treasures are kept, is in the Gothenburg University Humanities Library, and is located underground, accessed only by designated staff with key and key card access after navigating a rather confusing maze of elevators and corridors. The Humanities Library consists of two buildings joined together, with the library first built in the 1920s and a major addition built in the 1950s (Gothenburg University Library, Facts and Figures, n.d.). As they are underground, many of the areas of the closed stacks where its special collections are held are actually designated bomb shelters (personal communication with library staff). While this has been the case for decades, there has not been particular concern about the need to make use of these areas as bomb shelters for some time; during this time, collections have, of course, continued to grow within these areas. The potential challenges of arrangement are perhaps being reassessed with the invasion of Ukraine leading many Swedish newspapers to publish lists and maps of bomb shelters so that readers would know where to find those closest to them.

The position of the library, with major areas being housed underground, has also recently resulted in additional disturbances due to the major ongoing construction project in Gothenburg, Västlänken, a project to construct underground railway tunnels to facilitate public transit to, from, and within Gothenburg. Two underground stations are being constructed as part of this project, one at Haga and the other the major transit hub of Korsvägen, which is located quite close to the Humanities Library. This construction has necessitated underground explosions as well as major drilling through rock; this in turn has created challenging work environments for those in the vicinity of this project. KvinnSam’s main home, located on the main entry floor of the library was shifted upstairs due to noise and vibrations caused by construction drilling and explosions; some librarians in other departments affected by the construction are currently housed in Humanisten, a university building located next door to the library.

These unusual and severe disturbances can prompt thinking about the precariousness of cultural heritage objects, even when those objects are housed in secure ways. Military and political conflicts as well as natural disasters sometimes now exacerbated by the consequences of climate change demonstrate the difficulties of continued cultural heritage preservation in the contemporary world. While digitization is sometimes lauded as a way to protect and preserve cultural heritage in the face of these challenges (see for example Dreyfuss, 2018), as has been shown in section 3.2, digitization is not preservation; conflating the two does disservice both...
to the physical and digital objects under consideration. Digitized cultural heritage may also be at risk due to issues of digital decay as well as cyberattacks on cultural heritage organizations (see for example, Schrader, 2024). Considering and digitizing these damaged photographs can highlight the ways in which cultural heritage is always tenuous, always at risk, and may suggest alternative attitudes for dealing with the traumas of cultural heritage damage and destruction.

While the photographs under consideration may seem like overlooked or forgotten items, they have interacted with and continue to interact with a wide range of actors. One place where such interactions can be observed is through the back sides of the photographs, where some kinds of descriptive “metadata” has been recorded. On Photograph 2, for example, the reverse includes a handwritten description in black ink describing the basic image content of the photograph: the IKFF Congress at the Killeen Castle event, hosted by Lord and Lady Fingall (Figure 20). An additional handwritten note below this information appears on the top of white-out, which likely was added to correct potentially false information previously included, noting “Dublin 1926” in handwritten blue ink to identify the Congress of which this event was a part. The photograph also includes a pencil note with a number 3-5, and another smaller in black ink noting simply 5. The handwriting between these three notations differs significantly, pointing to the fact that at least three different individuals sought to identify and categorize this photograph in different ways.

Figure 20. Photograph 2, reverse side showing handwritten description of the photograph as well as white-out with corrections overwritten, possible older numbering system for the photographs as well as mold damage and loss.
The humans who have come into contact with these photographs can include individuals who may have been present at the event, providing the early information about what was depicted, while later additions or later prints may have involved individuals who sought to provide clarification of photographic content to assist in their organization and classification.

The reverse of Photograph 7 which, as was noted in section 6.3, is likely a significantly later printing of an image taken in 1926, demonstrates such a later addition (Figure 21). As the photographic print was not one likely possessed by individuals who participated in the event itself, the description on the back is singular, simply noting Dublin 1926, in the same handwriting as that appearing over the white-out on the reverse of Photograph 2 (Figure 20). It is likely that these ink notations were those of IKFF members who were working to initially organize these photographs as later professional archivists would be unlikely to permanently mark (i.e., damage) the photographs in this way.

Figure 21. Photograph 7, detail, showing reverse side of photograph with handwritten ink notation “Dublin 1926” as well as the impressions and accretions from other photographs with which this photograph was grouped.

The digital image of the reverse of Photograph 7 (Figure 21) also demonstrates material encounters between this and other photographs as are shown through the
presence of multiple layers and accretions, including the corner of Photograph 10, visible along the bottom edge the image.

Basic descriptive metadata is also now provided in pencil on the archival boxes of which house these photographs as well as the acid-free paper dividers that organize the photographs within the boxes. These are the work of KvinnSam staff, with the names of archivists who attended to these boxes indicated on the archival boxes themselves as well as information about mold interventions (Figure 21).

Figure 2. Image of archival boxes of damaged photographs in the KvinnSam IKFF Collection.

Figure 22. Image of archival boxes of damaged photographs in the KvinnSam IKFF Collection.
In some cases, the metadata or descriptions that are included on the photographs are obscured by damage, which may pose challenges for archivists, and may lead to incorrect classification and organization. For example, close examination of the digital image of the reverse of Photograph 6, indicates that this photograph may not actually be from the Dublin Congress at all, as the date indicated within the rust...
stain seems to be from 1928 rather than 1926 (Figure 22). This would have been difficult to see without digitization of the photograph, allowing for such close examination of these markings.

Figure 24. Photograph 6. Close up detail of date obscured by damage.

Recognizing the multiple careful and occasionally flawed encounters between these photographs and human actors, especially evident in the case of the classification of Photograph 6, demonstrates the ways in which these photographs continue to require interventions for appropriate care and classification.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the distinctions drawn between histories and contexts, images and materials, and encounters and assemblages are, to some extent, artificial; Bennett’s understanding of things as assemblages would, in fact, view these various components as importantly and inextricably interrelated. While some of the material changes and damages to the photographs occurred from non-human actors, human actors also have played roles in marking, classifying, and—in pre-KvinnSam interactions—intervening in ways that would actually create harm, as in the cases, for example metal paperclip use or unstable storage conditions. The histories contained the photographic images are vital to the history of these encounters, as it is this history that has led to their past and continued preservation. Finally, the generation of digital objects from the physical photographs likewise demonstrates the ways in which the assemblages of these photographs may become increasingly complex and diffuse.
7 Discussion

7.1 Findings

As the previous chapter has largely addressed the first of this thesis’s research questions, with the analysis illustrating the ways that new materialist theory might inform the selection and description of archival photographs during the digitization process, the discussion in this chapter will primarily focus on a discussion of the findings as they relate to the second research question. Based on the exploratory digitization undertaken for this thesis, the weird digitization of damaged cultural heritage objects can provide a number of benefits for cultural heritage institutions. Of course, weird digitization is based upon the selection criteria that involves damaged and otherwise unconventional objects for digitization, thus this discussion will necessarily incorporate some peripheral discussion of the new materialist approach. For ease, the findings will be grouped into three main categories in the discussion that follows: pragmatic, affective, and artistic.

7.1.1 Pragmatic Benefits

What I am calling the pragmatic benefits of weird digitization emphasize the ways in which such an approach to digitization could provide practical benefits to cultural heritage institutions and their users. As a method that does not seek mass or comprehensive digitization of archival collections, selecting the unique fringes of collections for weird digitization can offer intriguing entry points into a larger physical collection. While certain aspects of this method are labour-intensive, and thus, potentially expensive (see section 7.2), the concerted limited scope of weird digitization as well as some of the strategies employed in this project could be helpfully adapted in settings with low-budgets and limited staff. Leveraging increasingly high-quality smartphone cameras for exploratory digitization may allow institutions without dedicated digitization equipment or staff to undertake digitization that may still provide numerous benefits.

As noted in section 3.2, while digitization should not be conflated with preservation, it is the case that digitizing highly damaged objects such as the photographs explored within this thesis can help the preservation process through limiting handling of fragile items and allowing users some access to materials that would otherwise be inaccessible to them due to condition issues.

Leveraging interest from staff and researchers to explore specific cultural heritage objects in more fullness could lead to the development of valuable resources that could be used for a variety of purposes, from expanding catalogue descriptions to potentially creating a robust foundation for engaging physical and/or digital exhibits to encouraging artistic creativity. These possibilities mesh well with growing trends in the cultural heritage sector, such as creating “object biographies” or even autobiographies of objects and emphasizing storytelling and narrative in the presentation of cultural heritage to the public (Shep, 2016). The development of detailed or “thick” descriptions for content, material, and contexts can provide benefits to all users, but has significant potential to benefit visually impaired users of digitized materials, who often may not be considered during cultural heritage
digitization processes. Such descriptions can also serve to positively de-centre the primacy of the visual when digitizing photographs (see section 7.2).

As demonstrated in the analysis (Chapter 6), the process of weird digitization may help to uncover additional contexts, meanings, and data that were previously unexplored and even, in some cases, invisible. Campagnolo has noted that “the transformative nature of digitization, be this through imaging or metadata, permits the study of objects in novel and unexpected ways, bringing to the surface hidden features and presenting new data that, in turn, can be traced back to the original, restarting the cycle” (Campagnolo, 2020, p. 241). Allowing additional engagements with the physical objects through engagements with their digital forms can increase the potential for such hidden features to arise, both due to the affordances of the digital as well as the potential for increased access to these materials via their digital surrogates.

Damaged or otherwise “weird” cultural heritage objects may prove especially engaging to users, as evidenced by popular online collections such as the Public Domain Review which often focus on such unusual cultural heritage documents. Erica X. Eisen has written two compelling essays based on digitized damaged photographs for the Public Domain Review; one on the “killed” US Farm Security Administration photographs (i.e., those not selected for inclusion within the official archive) (Eisen, 2022a) and the other; and the other exploring digitized versions of Sergei Prokudin-Gorský’s early and now damaged experiments with colour photography (Eisen, 2022b). Continuing to digitize more obscure photographic collections and their damages may allow for the development of similarly absorbing considerations of digitized damaged cultural heritage. That the strange or damaged attracts many begins to indicate the possible affective potentials of selecting and digitizing such materials potentials which will be explored further in the next section.

7.1.2 Affective potentials

Many of scholars studying damaged cultural heritage have theorized and described the affective experiences that have been generated through their interactions with damaged cultural heritage (see section 3.3); these affective experiences often arise from the unique aesthetic qualities that damage presents. The aesthetic appeal of damage stems in part from the ways in which it calls attention to the fact that these objects are living things, continuing to interact with the world, with other living things like humans, animals, plants, and even mold spores, thus “manifest[ing] traces of independence or aliveness” (Bennett, 2010, p. xvi). And this recognition of aliveness can in turn stimulate powerful affective experiences which can increase engagement with the materials at hand. In meditating on an abandoned storage house, the archaeologist Thora Petursdottir, describes insights similar to Bennett’s new materialist observations: “Viewing this strange landscape was a powerful reminder of things’ ownness; their persistence but inevitable alteration with age— their own life, evolving at its own pace. This is a reality we tend to forget in our interactions with tamed, domesticated things rarely allowed to decay or wear out” (Petursdottir, 2014, p. 357). Reflecting on damages and on their strange and
sometimes upsetting beauty, can prompt care for these damaged objects as well as prompting considerations of the broader social and natural environments that interact with them. Affective experiences, whether experiences we would consider positive or negative, may incite action; this may mean prompting research or artistic endeavors or more diffuse actions of increased observation and care for the material world that surrounds us.

Though mold and other forms of damage are, of course, rightly major concerns for archival professionals, in cases where the mold has been remediated and objects stabilized, as in the case of the damaged photographs in KvinnSam’s IKFF Collection examined in Chapter 6, the threats, both to health, to archival preservation, and to other archival materials has been contained, thus making considerations the potential aesthetic attractiveness and affective pull of damages somewhat less fraught. The damaged IKFF photographs and their digital surrogates have reminded me variously of artists who work with (and purposefully “damage”) old photographs to generate new artistic works, such as that of David Tibet’s The Light is Leaving Us series to the work of a major artist like Anselm Kiefer whose works often incorporate materials that are subject to change and decay over time, such as straw and clay.

While most scholars taking damaged cultural heritage seriously focus their attention on physical sites and materials rather than on digital ones, the weird affordances of the digital can provide comparable if distinct possibilities for intimacy and thus for the generation of affective experiences. Jasmine Burns has noted the potential for aura to be “preserved and amplified” by the presence of digital copies, especially when digitization is undertaken with high degrees of technical sophistication (2017). Joacim Hansson has also looked to the ways in which the aura of the original objects may be “transferred into the digital realm.” As “an expression of ekphrastic hope” (Hansson, 2021, p. 110), the digitization process can allow for such expressions to create experiences of intimacy through the screen.

My own experience handling and digitizing the damaged IKFF photographs prompted such affective experiences, ones which resonate with the words of the poet Theodore Roethke, “I recover my tenderness by long looking” (1975). These photographs and their digitization challenged me to consider how best to handle and care for them, how best to digitize them and to describe and display them within this thesis. Perhaps the fact that it is poetry and poets who best articulate the experiences of intimacy I had with these photographs and the digital surrogates I created points to the deeply affective experiences that the photographs aroused in both their physical and digital forms. The poet Mark Doty’s meditative long essay, Still Life with Oysters and Lemon: On Objects and Intimacy, describes the experience of falling in love with a painting, Jan Davidsz de Heem’s still life from which the title of the essay is taken. Doty writes “I have felt the energy and life of the painting’s will; I have been held there, instructed. And the overall effect, the result of looking and looking into its brimming surface as long as I could look, is love, by which I mean a sense of tenderness toward experience, of being held within an intimacy with the things of the world” (Doty, 2001, p. 4). Learning to look carefully at things, and learning not to turn away from damaged things, can help to cultivate intimacy.
And this can, as Bennett might appreciate, help to develop more respect for matter, matter which, as this thesis has shown, can be digital as well as physical.

My encounters with these damaged objects prompted affective experiences which Doty would simply call love. He writes, “We are instructed by the objects that come to speak with us, those material presences. Why should we have been born knowing how to love the world? We require, again and again, these demonstrations” (Doty, 2001, p. 10). The “demonstrations” of the damaged IKFF photographs induced tenderness, intimacy, and perhaps even love toward other things in the world. Walking home from the library where I had been earlier been writing about these photographs, I found myself surprisingly entranced by a magpie bathing in a cold and dirty puddle at the edge of a street. Storm drains and street puddles are, apparently affectively evocative, whether the things they contain are living or dead, as in Bennett’s experience. While Bennett may not view the digital as a vector for such experiences, for me, the process of “long looking” both at the physical photographs in spring 2023 and then continuing to sit with and return to their digital presences on my screen through the fall and winter of 2024, did prompt the development of a tenderness for things of the world that might often be overlooked or ignored.

7.1.3 Artistic possibilities
In addition to pragmatic benefits of weird digitization, weird digitization can allow for affective experiences, experiences often incited by the aesthetic attractiveness of damage noted above. And recognizing the aesthetic potential of damaged cultural heritage may encourage new forms of artistic creativity. DeSilvey, for example, has experimented “with strategies that took on the forces of decay and deterioration as allies rather than adversaries” (DeSilvey, 41), and specifically explores the artistic potential of decayed and deteriorated cultural heritage. For example, during her time at one highly decayed homestead site, she described the difficulties in knowing what and how to save items that had been exposed to the elements and left to decay. Much of what she would simply constitute trash had the site not been marked for preservation.

Yet, DeSilvey noted that it often possessed a beauty that prompted additional reflective and, as seen in the previous section, a kind of affective new materialist reflection. Reflecting on a mold-infested National Geographic magazine she found on the site. She wrote “The mold had eaten away an image of a mountain town to expose a few bars of music, an area of green, shards of unintelligible text. There was a curious loveliness to the transformed scene—mountains and music and mold in a montage of indeterminate effect. The cultural spore of mass printed matter was caught up in the fungal ecologies of decay, its authority an impartial documentation of a world out there undermined by the microscopic imperatives of a world in here” (2017, p. 38). As a way to make use of such trash before simply discarding it (as preservation was not a reasonable option for many materials), DeSilvey took bits of texts out of the litter in the homestead. Inspired by the Dadaist poetry of Tristan Tzara, DeSilvey created what she called “salvage poetry” from these textual fragments (2017, p. 43).
Writing on a damaged wedding dress one which normally wouldn’t have been accepted as a cultural heritage donation due to its state of decay, Ingrid Mida has argued that “the thingly presence of [the] wedding attire was so potent that I could not bring myself to discard the dress and veil, even though in museological terms they might be described as ‘dead objects’” (2019, p. 296). Her affective experience of the thing-power of the dress prompted her to encourage artistic experimentation with this item, seeing cultural heritage as “a site of artistic provocation, in which ‘things’ take on new lives, and new forms” (Mida, 2019, p. 298).

Bringing damaged materials into the digital realm may allow more access to these objects, prompting additional affective and potentially artistic uses or reuses of them. For the damaged digitized photographs at the heart of this thesis, their affective and aesthetic appeal could prompt artistic use and experimentation with these images and their digital material presences. While the IKFF photographs digitized for this thesis remain creative possibilities rather than artistic products, the weird digitization of cultural heritage can allow for future artistic production.

### 7.2 Limitations

The work of weird digitization requires an attention to materials, to contexts, to networks, and to relationships that can be time- and labour-intensive. Thus, the costs of employing such a practice could be substantial on a larger scale, especially should more sophisticated digitization techniques be employed than were undertaken in the limited exploration evidenced here. Yet as should be evident from the discussion of method in 5.2.1 and 5.2.3, as a form of critical digitization, weird digitization is not suitable, nor is it intended, as method for the comprehensive digitization of a collection. Rather it seeks in part to create entry points for inquiry into the parts of collections that have not yet been digitized, collections that would be impossible to digitize in their entirety.

In the selection, description, and exploratory digitization undertaken for this study, there was a need to draw on areas well outside of this author’s area of expertise, especially as concerned the material processes of decay as well as photographic processes (see section 6.3); though, as noted previously (see section 6.2), this may prove an asset rather than a limitation (DeSilvey, 2017). While attempting to assuage the most severe of these limitations through consultation with KvinnSam archivists and the Gothenburg University conservator as well as undertaking additional study (see section 6.3), weird digitization, as a kind of critical digitization practice (see sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.3), underscores the need for cooperation and collaboration between cultural heritage professionals with different specializations when undertaking these kinds of digitization processes (see section 3.2). As noted above, however these collaborations may add to the potential costs of such digitization. Campagnolo argues that adding information layers to digital surrogates “allows [them] to represent, through modelling, the intricacies of the original objects and permits new avenues of research on entire collections, not otherwise as easily accomplished through direct inspection of the items. Each activity in a project, however, requires budgeting for time and money, and metadata work is slow and costly” (Campagnolo, 2020, p. 239). This costliness can increase the
pressures on selection criteria, thus care will need to be taken to consider how to balance this costliness with the added value such digitization may provide to objects, institutions, and users.

As noted above (section 7.1), weird digitization of these damaged photographs can place them into new relations, opening up possibilities for research, for artistic exploration, and for affective experiences. Yet these new relations can potentially serve to distance the objects from their existing relations and contexts. This is especially a possibility with the digital objects as digital access allows them to be transferred and used well outside of their archival contexts. Yet this limitation too, may prove a benefit, allowing these objects to have lives and be useful outside the confines of the physical archive.

One potential limitation for the digitization of damaged cultural heritage are concerns about—and possible understandable resistance to—showing such damage within archives, as these may lead to critiques of archival practices or accusations of neglect. Yet showing damaged objects within archives has the potential to benefit cultural heritage institutions, allowing them to present more realistic understandings of the challenges faced by their collections and the staff who serve them.

The weird digitization undertaken for this thesis has sought to allow for the textures and material qualities of photographs to be shown, in addition to their content. Image content has tended to be the usual focus of photographic digitization, especially digitization undertaken on a mass scale. Thus developing digitization approaches that can better attend to material content in addition to image content is vital to create opportunities for research as well as spurring additional affective experiences discussed above (section 7.1). Yet most practices of cultural heritage digitization—including the weird digitization undertaken here—continues to privilege the visual (Geismar, 2018), largely due to the most obvious affordances of the technologies. Geismar discusses the ways that the affordances of zoom technologies allow viewers of a digitized version of Holbein’s painting The Ambassadors “to examine the pigment and brushstrokes that comprise the image. This provides us with a completely different perspective on the painting from how it was painted to be seen (from a distance, but also at an angle)” (Geismar, 2018, p. 82). While intensifying vision in some ways, this also provides a limited view, as the digital “perspective is not scaled to the human body or dependent on bodily movement” which are required to see the anamorphic skull in the bottom of the painting. Instead, Geismar writes, “it provides the viewer with the capacity to see like a machine—in this case a microscope. This can be seen as taking the drive to single points of meaning to its most logical conclusion—moving us very literally away from the relativist understandings of perspectives that Holbein was presenting towards the naturalisation of a singular subject position, one located deep within the object itself” (Geismar, 2018, p. 82).

This exploratory digitization undertaken within this thesis has attempted to avoid this kind of singular vision through capturing images of the photographs from multiple angles, allowing for textures and alternative perspectives. Further, the thick descriptions accompanying the images may allow for non-visual (or extra-visual)
These explorations have thus attempted to “leave behind the emphasis on the visual in the process of digitisation, and avoid trying to create a simulated environment that by necessity can be apprehended only visually” (Geismar, 2018, p. 103), yet despite these attempts to assuage some of the temptations of digital scopophilia, it the temptations of zoom as well as the dominance of the visual still dominate this project in its present state. Yet this act of looking like a machine can also allow closeness with things that otherwise can be difficult to inspect carefully (or for many, impossible to inspect at all), and can ideally open up new areas of exploration.

Scaling up the aspects of weird digitization that could allow for the visual hegemony of most photographic digitization, such as thick description and multiple digital images of a single item from multiple angles may pose challenges to the structures of content management systems. Park notes that content management systems such as those used frequently by cultural heritage institutions often “hinder our ability to document the materiality of digital objects and to reveal silent actors (e.g., the public) hidden in the interaction” (2021, p. 240). Park argues for the “need to adopt open, participatory models that acknowledge and invite the general public, as actors in the collections documentation process, to capture multiple voices around digital objects and visualize their materiality” (2021, p. 244). This project has, due to the constraints of time and logistics, not been able to so engage the public in this process, nor has this project been able to investigate scholarly and affective responses to these digital beyond that of this researcher. These could be areas for future research that will be discussed briefly in the conclusions to this thesis (Chapter 8). Considering more fully the ways that these digitized cultural heritage objects may “actually feel to access, to use and re-use and, significantly, how they make one feel connected to the past emotionally as well as intellectually (i.e. their auratic quality)” (Jeffrey, 2015, p. 150) for users beyond this researcher would be helpful in identifying additional values of and limitations to this approach.

With the theoretical approach of new materialism taken within the this thesis, the damaged photographs at the heart of this thesis—both in their physical and digitized forms—encourage self-reflective and affective responses. As has been shown in the previous section (7.1) these responses comprise a major benefit of weird digitization. However, valid concerns may be raised about the ways that articulating one’s positionality in relation to cultural heritage objects may involve risks for the cultural heritage professional. While arguments could be made for anonymizing of personal names in those cases, anonymization could create challenges by obscuring key details that may be of import for later researchers. Precise guidance concerning what kinds of boundaries scholars and professionals may wish to draw for themselves when sharing their positionality and affective responses are difficult to locate thus leaving it up to the individual to make choices concerning what or how much to share within their research.

While sharing too much may raise issues of privacy for the scholar, sharing too little may obscure some of the selective and descriptive choices made. Perhaps one example can bring this to light. In the analysis of the contexts and histories for the Dublin Congress photographs in section 6.2, I discussed the absences within the
photographs, specifically discussing issues pertaining to identification papers and border crossings, causing some WILPF delegates to miss the Congress. Something that I wrote in that section and then deleted as possibly too personally sensitive pertained to immigration challenges that I currently face and through which I am inevitably reading this history. This positionality shaped my response to these photographs, to the absences within them, to my reading of the Proceedings of the Congress, yet such personal details may be uncomfortable or even risky to share. Though I am now sharing it, if guardedly and vaguely, perhaps at this point it is buried so deep within the text of this thesis that no one but the most diligent and hopefully sensitive reader is likely to discover it.

Finally, limitations to the selection criteria should be addressed here. DeSilvey writes that “We live in a world dense with things left behind those who came before us, but we only single out some of these things for our attention and care.” (DeSilvey, 2017, p. 3). Even within the limited number of boxes containing damaged IKFF photographs, there were dozens of photographs that were not selected, and of course, this is to say nothing of the photographs within the whole KvinnSam collections. As this project has not sought to be comprehensive but exploratory, and as it is a thesis project confined by the realities of research and writing time and space, singling out only a few things for attention and care was inevitable. Still, the hope is that this project could spur considerations of where attention and care may be needed elsewhere within cultural heritage institutions and digitization projects.

### 7.3 Summary

This discussion has sought to demonstrate the possibilities and limitations of weird digitization for cultural heritage, especially for damaged cultural heritage. The possibilities encouraged and enabled by this method, as well as the limitations to which such a method may be prone, demonstrate opportunities for future research and experimentation with this method. The conclusions that follow will briefly touch upon some of these opportunities while summarizing the thesis and its implications.
8 Conclusion

With the digitization of cultural heritage now typically being viewed as an undisputed good, and even, in some cases, a necessity, there is a need to critically question the hegemony of such assumptions. The mass or comprehensive digitization of heterogeneous and delicate archival materials is an impossibility, thus new strategies for cultural heritage digitization should be explored in order to leverage the benefits of digitization while approaching digitization critically and carefully. This thesis has sought to develop one such strategy for archival materials, here called weird digitization for archival materials. The method developed within the thesis synthesizes the methods of critical digitization with the thick description of cultural heritage. New materialist theory has been used as a foundation within this project, informing the selection criteria for such exploratory digitization.

The process of weird digitization allowed for deep engagement—even engrossment—with a set of damaged archival photographs. This engagement prompted considerations of the histories and materials of these photographs while also recognizing the ways in which such photographs have encountered and interacted with a range of other things and other beings during their material lives. Ideally such engagement can prompt more critical and ethical practices of digitization within the cultural heritage sector.

This type of digitization can thus provide pragmatic values such as enriched descriptive metadata, more accurate historical contextualization, supporting conservation and preservation, and facilitating the development of digital exhibits. It can also provide affective experiences prompted by the aesthetic appeal of these damaged items, appeal that can be democratized through the process of digitization. Finally, these weird digital objects suggest artistic possibilities that could be explored by cultural heritage institutions and their users (for an example, see Figure 25).

Future areas for research could include experimenting with weird digitization in other archival and cultural heritage collections, as well as experimenting with the application of new materialist theory when selecting materials for digitization. The potential benefits of this method could likewise be further explored through the engagement of a wider range of stakeholders, including the public, in the process of weird digitization. Studying the value that such digitization may or may not provide to users would also be a fruitful area for future research. Making these images accessible to the public could enable additional scholarly insights as well as prompting artistic use and reuse of these images.
Figure 25. Photograph 10. Detail suggesting the aesthetic potential of the digital images generated.
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