Remember my little granite pail?
The handle of it was blue.
Think what’s got away in my life—
Was enough to carry me thru.

_Lorine Niedecker, “Remember My Little Granite Pail?”_

When I was carrying out my doctoral fieldwork, I spent an afternoon with the curator at the Grant-Kohrs Ranch, a property in Montana now managed by the National Park Service. During my visit, the curator showed me some of her field collections. The items in her care included tin cans full of nails, mismatched horseshoes, unidentifiable metal parts, stray hardware, lengths of rope, and other mundane objects associated with late nineteenth- and twentieth-century farming and ranching practice. I asked the curator how the public valued these collections, given that the material they contained would seem unremarkable to anyone who had spent time in the rural American West. Her answer was instructive:

The thing that seems to make people respect it more is . . .
the better it’s taken care of. If it’s all in a heap they consider it trash. But if you single it out and put it in a little tray and
pad it and look like you’re trying to take care of it, it seems to have more value, in people’s eyes.¹

The curator’s comment aligns neatly with an observation made by Cornelius Holtorf and Oscar Ortman: “We prefer . . . a past that is fragile, cannot be replaced, and needs our help . . . One might even say that archaeological sites are not being saved because they are valued, but rather they are valued because they are being saved.”² The preservation paradigm that guides most contemporary heritage practice singles out certain features, puts them in various equivalents of the “little padded tray,” and makes it look like we’re trying to take care of them.³ In this sense, the act of extending care actually produces value, although it is often presented as a response to the inherent value of the threatened object or structure.

One French architectural historian describes the impulse to rescue threatened features as part of a “Noah complex,” which frames the material past as always endangered, requiring intervention to avert loss (and providing a circular justification for further investment in preservation measures).⁴ Holtorf returned to these themes in a recent essay, written with Anders Höberg, in which they argue, “As a result of preoccupation with our all-too-human needs and desires to care, and to give the impression that we care, we have never asked what role we can expect heritage to play in the actual future.”⁵ In fact, 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.⁶

As the preceding chapters have shown, however, the impulse to care is not so easily extinguished. Even when a decision has been made to accept eventual ruination, as at
Mullion Harbour, in moments of threat, it is extremely difficult to step back and allow destruction to continue unchecked. Letting “nature take its course” is invariably more workable in theory than in practice. If we are to explore alternatives to the preservation paradigm, perhaps we need to develop modes of care that help us negotiate the transition between presence and absence. Greg Kennedy, drawing on both Heidegger and the teachings of Buddhism, offers insights that might be useful in this regard. He makes a distinction between care that imposes its will on an external world of things and beings, and care that establishes a relation with the cared for, and allows that relationship to work back on the self in unpredictable ways. He writes, “Things are disclosed as things only by our taking care of them in a manner that allows them to refer their being back to our essential embodied neediness.”⁷ His use of the term “neediness” corresponds to an acknowledgment of human finitude and vulnerability, and the willingness to recognize the same qualities in nonhuman subjects. He states, “Authentic care senses the truth of death and discloses it accordingly.”⁸

Although Kennedy’s argument is directed toward rethinking our relationship with the disposable, it offers useful resources for grounding an entropic heritage practice, in which the withholding of physical care does not have to mean withdrawal of a care-ful attitude toward the objects of the past that we engage with. The key, it seems, is to realize that by accepting ongoing process, we are not automatically triggering disposal and loss. Rather, we may in fact be opening ourselves up to a more meaningful and reciprocal relationship with the material past. Kennedy writes, “Taking care of a thing in a way that lets it be what it is acknowledges, even if only tacitly, that the thing shares the same essential fragility of our embodied existence . . . What practical taking care acknowledges
is the tendency of all physical beings to degrade, decay, to lapse into nothingness.”⁹ Sometimes practical taking care may involve acts of repair and maintenance that secure the material fabric of the thing; at other times, taking care may involve withholding repair and letting the thing carry on with its changes. If we choose the second path, we may find that it offers the opportunity to recognize the interpenetration between ourselves and a wider world of beings in a “network of mutual relations.”¹⁰

Castle Drogo looms over the Teign Gorge at the edge of Dartmoor, a vast granite folly often described as the last castle in England. Millionaire Julius Drewe built the castle in the first decades of the twentieth century as an invented ancestral seat to house the fortune he had amassed through his prosperous retail empire. He hired architect Edwin Lutyens to design the structure, which incorporated approximately 5,000 tons of local granite and used imported Trinidadian asphalt on the flat roof. The roof leaked, and so did the windows. The National Trust acquired the house and its extensive grounds in 1974; after three and a half decades, the building’s porosity had become so problematic that they decided to launch a last-chance campaign to raise the funds necessary to “Save Castle Drogo” from “certain ruin.”¹¹ Eleven million pounds later, in 2012, construction commenced. The whole structure was enclosed in scaffolding and a vast white plastic tent. The castle remained open to visitors, although most of the collection was boxed up and many parts of the castle were off-limits. During construction, the National Trust commissioned artists to make work in and around the site, in response to both the history of the building and to its contemporary remaking. At the midway point of the five-year restoration project, a group of artists was selected to imagine what might have
happened if Castle Drogo had not been saved and had instead been “left to the elements.”¹² The resulting work offers a glimpse of what it might look like to invite the “network of mutual relations” into the space of heritage interpretation.

Off a first-floor corridor, just past an installation commemorating The First Drip to penetrate the building, is The Outside In Room.¹³ The former night nursery has been transformed to blur the boundary between inside and outside, and to introduce visitors to the microinhabitants that conservation usually seeks to eradicate. Moth-eaten curtains hang off the four-poster canopy bed, and the flooring has been treated to simulate the effects of woodworm. A false wooden wall covers one side of the room, its weathered slats twined with ivy and ferns and its surface perforated to let through simulated natural light (and a glimpse of the Dartmoor countryside on a digital screen). Throughout the room, giant fabric models of common domestic insect pests have been placed on tables and mantles—wood lice, silverfish, case-bearing moths, furniture beetles—alongside short descriptions of their diets and life cycles. A framed fragment of moth-eaten carpet hangs above the fireplace.

A Little Cupboard of Decay provides a filmic narrative to help the visitor make sense of all this. The film, shown on a screen set into a wooden cabinet, draws a parallel between the erosive processes that shaped the Dartmoor landscape and the unwelcome, moisture-induced erosion of the castle itself before going on to introduce the “microbes and mycelium spores” and the ranks of “tiny decomposers” working away at the fabric of the structure. The narrative points out that the insect names provide evidence of the long-standing relationship between people and pests: clothes moths, flour beetles, fur beetles, bed mites, grain weevils, wine moths, book lice. Each agent of decay is celebrated as a “highly evolved expert
in its individual field,” though it is noted that their expertise is appreciated more outside (where they provide essential services to “the rich cycles of Life on Earth”) than in (where they are “the Heritage Industry’s greatest foes”). *The Outside In Room*, the film explains, allows them to enjoy “an interrupted paradise of decay” until the “heroic saviours” working on the restoration of the building summarily evict them.

The provisional and playful installation makes space for the other beings that inhabit the castle within the context of the restoration that will ensure (if only temporarily) their expulsion. As the conservation project nears completion, it becomes possible to contemplate a counterfactual trajectory of nonintervention. Interpretation functions in the tense of the speculative future anterior, articulating “what would have been,” had the roof not been replaced, the building not “saved.” It is possible to read *The Outside In Room* as a vindication of the necessity of repair (which is partly what the National Trust intended), but it is also possible to read it against the grain as a celebration of another set of choices. When the fund-raising campaign launched, some suggested that the building be left to ruin, given its relatively recent pedigree and the pressing need for funds to save other (presumably more worthy) structures. The prospect of the castle’s demise is written into its history, from its first leak, and by acknowledging this reality, the recent interpretation “opens up a time and space for the monument that does not relegate it to a past that is already accomplished, nor to an anticipated future.”¹⁴ The artwork instead, as Aron Vinegar and Jorge Otero-Pailos have written, “engages [by] mobilizing the possibilities inherent in the rhythms, echoes, resonances and staging of [the building’s] complexity.”¹⁵

The work at Castle Drogo, in a tentative way, shows a willingness to engage with the potentially generative aspects of
entropy and decay that is unusual in contemporary heritage practice. In terms set by Elizabeth Grosz, it works in the “in-between,” finding meaning in the collapse of boundaries that are usually taken for granted. Grosz writes,

The space of the in-between is the locus for social, cultural and natural transformations: it is not simply a convenient space for movements and realignments but in fact is the only place—the place around identities, between identities—where becoming, openness to futurity, outstrips the conventional impetus to retain cohesion and unity.¹⁶

So we return to the question of identity and subjectivity introduced in the first chapter and touched on since in various ways. To open ourselves up to a space of “movements and realignments” is to unsettle our own sense of a coherent and unified self, to recognize that our identities are made through processes of subversion and fraying as much as they are through processes of consolidation and stabilization. When we accept the continual becoming of the objects and architectures we share our world with, beyond a narrow conception of their instrumental value, we also acknowledge our own becoming. In the process, our sense of temporality shifts to allow the past to fold into the present in indeterminate ways. Michael E. Zimmerman, writing about Heidegger’s concept of the self as “the clearing in which entities appear,” comments, “Understanding occurs [not as a relation between mind and object, but] because human temporality is receptive to particular ways in which things can present or manifest themselves.”¹⁷ By decentering and dissolving the mind–object relation, he argues, we are able to free ourselves for “spontaneous compassion towards other beings, human and nonhuman alike. One ‘lets things be’ not for any external
goal, but instead simply from a profound identification with all things."¹⁸

The act of “letting be,” when performed intentionally and attentively, can perhaps form the foundation for a post-humanist heritage paradigm. Rodney Harrison touches on the ethical implications of such a shift in perspective and practice, arguing for “a more inclusive sense of ethics, that acknowledges not only the rights of humans, but also those of other-than-humans—agentive animals, plants, objects, places.”¹⁹ Such an ethical stance, he suggests, may free us from the compulsion to instinctively conserve and instead allow us to find, or create, modes of action appropriate to specific and unique circumstances. He draws on Deborah Bird Rose’s concept of “connectivity ethics,” which she defines as “open, uncertain, attentive, participatory, contingent.”²⁰ When encountering a vulnerable other (a building, a species, an artifact, a place), one is called on to act, but the appropriate action is allowed to emerge from the encounter, and it may be that our sense of responsibility leads us to attend to change and transformation rather than revert to perpetuation and preservation. We can begin to imagine what it would feel like to extend care without conservation—and to unshackle ourselves from the instinctive leap to save at all costs.

Attending to processes of decay and disintegration can be as productive of heritage values as acts of saving and securing, but these may be different values than we are used to identifying with heritage practice. Ioannis Poulilos has called for a new conception of “living heritage” as an alternative to dominant heritage models, which privilege the preservation of original fabric and function by establishing a discontinuity between the past and the present.²¹ Living heritage instead privileges “change, in the context of continuity” and makes
space for a much broader range of material practices, which might include replacement, renewal, and attrition.²² Such an approach rejects the premise that heritage is by definition a nonrenewable resource and instead asserts that heritage can be continually renewed if the social relations and practices that give it meaning are sustained over time, even if the associated material fabric is substantially altered or erased. The process of transformation can be productive in its own right: some things will remain, but others will be allowed to pass on, or over.

To imagine how a postpreservation heritage practice might unfold in a specific place and make possible particular futures, let us return to Mullion Harbour. Before moving forward, however, we need to take a snapshot from the recent past. On March 13, 2015, two entries appeared on the Lizard National Trust Facebook page (Lizard referring to the name of the peninsula where Mullion is located). The first entry included four photographs of the Mullion repairs, captioned “definitely on the homeward straight now”: one documented the repaired southern breakwater and its newly smooth concrete flanks. The other entry reported on progress repairing Tremayne Quay, another National Trust property located several miles away in the sheltered upper reaches of the Helford River. This entry noted, “Thanks to some surplus coping stones from Mullion Harbour . . . we have been able to rebuild a section of wall in the same style as the rest of the quay.” The long, rectangular granite blocks had been displaced by the use of concrete in the Mullion repairs, making them available for other uses. It is not certain whether the coping stones were part of the original fabric of Mullion’s structure, given that they were located on a section of breakwater that has been rebuilt multiple times in the past. Storm-sheared
sections of Mullion’s metal railings were also repurposed into new mooring posts for Tremayne Quay.²³

As Mullion is gradually dismantled over the next few decades—or as its fabric undergoes an incremental replacement of granite with concrete, akin to the renewal of cells in a body—its materials will gradually be released, and often reused. The movement of the stone, in particular, presents an opportunity to narrate both the history of the harbor, when the stones were assembled into the structure, and its future trajectories, when the same material will be assembled into other (equally ephemeral, but provisionally durable) structures. The traveling stones could be interpreted in situ, in their new homes, with a plaque noting the path of their travels. The memory associated with Mullion Harbour would become mobile, expressed through a material link, but not reliant on that material presence for its persistence. As Kevin Lynch reminds us in his brilliant 1972 book What Time Is This Place?, “Preservation is not simply the saving of old things but the maintaining of a response to those things. This response can be transmitted, lost or modified. It may survive the . . . thing itself.”²⁴ Back in Mullion Cove, as the smaller granite setts are once again lifted from the harbor walkways in subsequent storm seasons, and as a decision is ultimately taken not to replace them, they might be gathered and reassembled elsewhere in chance cairns, perhaps on the hillside overlooking the harbor, where over a dozen memorial benches already cluster. The cairns would join the benches in performing the work of memory, not through the promise of presence, but through, as John Wylie has observed, a constitutive absence.²⁵

A heritage practice that places process on an equal footing with preservation would need to cultivate a greater willingness to work with fragments and would need to seek alternatives to reconstruction and restoration. To return to Riegł's
terms, interpretation would need to be attentive to the transition from extensive effect (the perception of the whole) to intensive effect (the force of the fragment).²⁶ It could dwell in the interval in which fragmentariness is actually an interpretive asset rather than a perceived deficit. As Mats Burström writes, it is “the lack of a complete original that fascinates people and invites interpretation . . . [and] gives people an active role in the interpretive process.”²⁷ Our perception of the part, rather than the whole, opens up a space that invites speculation and connection. Burström goes on to claim, “Things may gain rather than lose meaning through fragmentation, and for this reason fragmentation may be intentional rather than accidental.”²⁸

Intentional fragmentation is one in a range of alternative practices that could emerge in the future in relation to certain sites and subjects. It is perhaps unlikely that a shift toward curated decay will displace the preservation paradigm anytime soon, but there may be opportunities to use the ideas in this book to frame experiments that work with abandonment and to stage ephemeral interventions that respond to moments of flux or change. Jane M. Jacobs and Stephen Cairns have written of the creative possibilities that coalesce around informal and incremental architectures, in which people are granted the agency to respond to change and ruination on their own terms, unscripted.²⁹ At the moment, our comportment toward heritage objects tends to cleave to a relatively narrow register of possible responses—appreciation, contemplation, concern. A postpreservation model of heritage would open up many more, and many of them in an active rather than a passive mode of engagement—creation, cultivation, improvisation, renewal.

As I bring this book to a close, I hope I have stimulated some curiosity about what it might look like to test some of
the ideas I have introduced in a broader arena. But I can’t
end the story without acknowledging the unanswered ques-
tions that have been stirred up and are now swirling in the
murk. How would heritage legislation and policy need to
change to accommodate these approaches? What are the
political implications of providing (or appearing to provide)
a justification for neglect and disinvestment? Could insti-
tutional heritage practice adopt forms of care that make no
claims to material protection, or is the risk of loss (of both
reputation and resources) too great? Can designation coun-
tenance destruction? Most of these questions are outside the
scope of this book, although I’m continuing to work through
them and hope to be able to offer some tentative answers
before Mullion Harbour disappears (though perhaps not be-
fore the Orfordness Lighthouse does). The aim of this book
has been to offer glimpses of how it could be otherwise, and
to draw out how what we might call entropic heritage prac-
tice is already emerging in certain places and circumstances,
although it may not be known as such. I’m not able to fol-
low these places through to their next chapters, so I need to
leave them in the midst of their changes, with a final invita-
tion to think about what could be gained if we were to care
for the past without pickling it.