10.2478/abcsj-2021-0015

"Daft naff Scottish things":
Stuff, Waste and Memory Objects in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*

CARMEN BORBELY

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Abstract

Guided by new materialist approaches to the memory of loss, this reading of Jackie Kay's 1998 novel *Trumpet* surveys the affective permutations registered by different objects of remembrance in the Scottish-Nigerian writer's fictional account of mourning. Exploring several material figurations of Black Scottishness in Kay's writings, the essay derives its main theoretical framework from studies on blended subject-object ontologies, including Bill Brown's critique of *thingness*, Maurizia Boscagli's notion of the disruptive agency of *stuff*, and Mel Y Chen's view of matter's *animacy*, and discusses how the novel latches onto the role of things in anchoring memory and in helping humans work through bereavement.

Keywords: objects of memory, souvenirs, objects of mourning, thing-power, thing theory, thingness, animacy, stuff theory, Black Scottishness, prosopopoeia

Writing from the "border country": Kay's interstitial imagination

Jackie Kay, Scotland's Makar from 2016 to 2021, has been hailed as a poet, prose writer and playwright whose work acts as a kind of seismograph for dynamically redefined notions of Scottishness in a post-national(ist) age marked by compositeness, openness to diversity, and hospitality to immigrant or diasporic cultures (Niven 320), but also by some persistent divisionism that prevents more traditional modes of

national self-representation from accommodating Scotland's "multifacetedness" (Brown, "In/outside" 219). Speaking recently about the contemporary relevance of "In My Country," her magisterial poem of nearly three decades ago about the clashing psycho-geographies of Scottishness, Kay has emphasised that tenacious overlap of parochialism and cosmopolitanism, stating that "Our image of what a Scottish person looks like needs to keep changing, to reflect the country as it is now, not what it once might have been. If we're going to stick to our familiar clichés then let us see black men in kilts and black women on shortbread tins" (Kay, "Scotland's"). This direct reference to the convulsive polarities of the "Jekyll-and-Hyde physiognomy of modern Scottishness" (Nairn 146) is cogently captured in Kay's use of the trope of mass-marketed commodities that are still instrumental to shaping a well-branded, albeit anachronistic heritage nationalism in Scotland (Jackson 98-99), despite the evidence that this symbolic capital ought to be distributed, in all fairness, to the multiply-inflected civic space and to "promote hybrid, cross-cultural modes of national affiliation" (Brown, "In/outside" 219). Indeed, as Joseph H. Jackson's argues, the concept of a Black Scotland is reducible to neither a sporadic "record of individual black lives" (1), which would sideline the idea of racial multiplicity in favour of white homogeneity, nor to a subset of the hegemonic model of Black Britishness (4), which would simply ignore the fact that Scotland's much-clamoured "fundamental heterogeneity" is the outcome of sensibly different historical and social contingencies than those exclusively pertaining to Britain's imperial legacy (9).

My interest in the object world or "material imaginary" (Tischleder 58) of Kay's fiction initially stemmed from the image of the shortbread tin she invoked in her above-mentioned *Sunday Post* interview. The shortbread tin is a souvenir that may acquire its value as an object of memory by both reminding of and supplanting the tourist's emplaced experience (Stewart 133). It is also an ordinary item that can be enlivened by its dynamic imbrication within the networks of social transaction Arjun Appadurai discusses in his "anthropology of things" (1-5). Anticipating new materialist accounts of the things' refusal to dwell inertially within the (post)humanistic texture of the world (Brown, "Thing Theory" 2),

Appadurai shows in his introduction to *The Social Life of Things* (1986) that even though matter appears to passively bear being encoded with value by human agents, it can also, in turn, exert agency and extend value to human life. Mentioned twice in *Trumpet* (1998), Kay's only novel so far, as a commodity that can reassert, rekindle or resignify national sentiment (85, 139), the tin of shortbread is one of the "things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context" rather than being simply subsumed to, or utterly separated from, the subject (Appadurai 5). Because it can spur intense feelings – as a target of deprecation, if looked at as yet another icon of "vulgar Scottishism or tartanry" (Nairn 123), or as a cherished souvenir that can muster a sense of sociocultural identification for its owners and strengthen their family bonds – the shortbread tin becomes emblematic of the capacity of the objects in Kay's novel to trigger emotional engagement with a world that, rather than serving as an inert backdrop to the work of mourning, actively bears witness to the suffering inheritors go through.

Embracing the challenges of troping the cultural landscape of Black Scotland (the "here" that she firmly identifies as her home territory in the poem "In My Country"), Kay grounds her artistic creed in the awareness that "I write from that border country" (Rowell 268). This foregrounds liminality as a field of affective overlap between her divergent "strands of identity" (Kay, "Jackie Kay" 122) and provides a frame for understanding how they are blended together. As a writer of Scottish-Nigerian descent whose allegiances are inevitably trans/national, Kay voices a perspective that taps creatively into the potentialities of "being both Black *and* Scottish" (Rowell 277). Therefore, key to her poetic self-representations is tracing not so much the collision as the conjunction between the cultural trajectories of, on the one hand, diasporic Africanness, and on the other hand, Scotland's white "ethno-Celticism" (Jackson 93). In poems like "Kail and Callaloo," grasping the alliterative likeness of foods linked metonymically to spaces of colonial violence – the Highlands, haunted by the spectre of the famine unleashed by the clearances, and the Caribbean, redolent of the atrocities committed by the slave traders during the Middle Passage – becomes a discursive template for reflecting on the bond

between different other components of “Afro-Scottishness” that tend to be written out of official records and documents:

you know the passport forms
or even some job applications noo-a-days?
well, there’s nowhere to write
Celtic-Afro-Caribbean
in answer to the ‘origin’ question;
they think that’s a contradiction

how kin ye be both? (“Kail and Callaloo” 195)

This “being both” stages a world in which convergences can be ceaselessly generated between the Celtic and the African poles of identity, as they are thrust into simultaneous limelight by the poet’s restitutive imagination (Jenkins 126). Linking together inspiration derived from Black and Scottish literary predecessors who “werenie even taught in school,” the poem echoes the energising insurgencies of Hugh MacDiarmid’s use of the Scots language and the feminist depths of Liz Lochhead’s poetic texts, with their “stop and start rhythm” (Kay, “Kail and Callaloo” 196), while also saluting the articulation of a counter-hegemonic Black discourse in the works of new diasporic writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Bessie Head and Audrey Lorde. Kay’s celebration of her Scottish and Black precursors is premised on what Yogita Goyal has described as the “shift from Atlantic to global” (28) in “processing the remains and revenants of a violent history” (4) of racism, a history whose spectres refuse suppression and silencing just like the “Bogie man” and the “ghost called duppy” that are invoked in the poem (Kay, “Kail and Callaloo” 196). Yet while connecting the present to the wide-reaching implications of colonialism, the spiritual bridges the poetic self has arched across time also shuttle back and forth the global nodes of “Celtic-Afro-Caribbeanness,” dismissing the legitimacy of fixed origins and mobilising the material anchors of cultural memory. The image of the poet

finding out more and more
aboot
the moving root
like the plant that feeds on air (“Kail and Callaloo” 196)

yields insight into the material contingencies of memory and identity, now re-envisioned as layered, mobile, and multiple. In fact, by offering a compelling representation of this thickly intersected Black diasporic space that has expanded its geography to include the Scottish Highlands, the reference to roots that may be ungrounded and re-grounded in Kay's poem "counters the hegemony of any single genealogy" (Goyal 173), imaginatively rescaling conceptions of individual selfhood to accommodate its interconnectedness not only with other selves, but also with the richly diverse vegetation nourishing them:

I'm eating callaloo and kail now
tattie scones and pumpkin pie
so many foods I never tasted
mango before I was nineteen
or yam or cocoa root or sugar cane... ("Kail and Callaloo" 196)

Balancing the contrast between the material plenitude afforded to the speaker at present and the dearth that caused her ancestors' starvation in the past, between her indulgent feast and their enforced fast, or between the regimes of consumption v. deprivation that privileged plantation owners against slave workers, the imagery of food in "Kail and Callaloo" ultimately delineates an archival site of reminiscence in which, as Tischleder would say, "subjecthood and objecthood constitute each other" (43). It brings into focus a surge of memories about the Celtic crofters and the black Jacobins who put up different forms of resistance against colonial rule, converting hunger into an instrument of political protest and struggle (Kay, "Kail and Callaloo" 196-197). As "paradigmatic commodities" of the colonial and postcolonial global economies (Roy 166), the foods occasioning a cultural feast in Kay's poem are not only symbolic of the variety and vibrancy associated with diasporic flora and vegetation. They also recall memories of the differential access to resources for settlers and natives, reinforcing the idea that famine and the vulnerabilities it generated accounted for "one of the notorious features of colonial rule" (Roy 170). Kay's intention of writing from the "border country" rests on a capacity to grasp the transhistorical forces that have shaped a "nationally specific black experience" in Scotland (Jackson 80) or, conversely, that have incorporated the Highlands within the African

diasporic memory. This memory reconfigures Kay's geography of the "borders and borderlines" (Rowell 268) which interconnect all these cultural identity constituents in ways that can overwrite the phantasmal story of origins into a narrative of becoming "Celtic-Afro-Caribbean" (Kay, "Kail and Callaloo" 195). This assortment of foods, functioning as material testimonies of colonial practices from different corners of the world, provides cultural and ideological sustenance to the subject, whose burgeoning awareness of her multiple genealogies enables her to "negotiate experiences of dailiness as well as of world-historical significance" (Roy 161). Approached as tokens of cultural heritage and political critique, the foods occupying the speaker's field of awareness in the poem impart a sense that matter – including matter that is edible and, hence, exhaustible through consumption – influences one's view of selfhood and reveals their ontological interdependence with the world. Not least, in highlighting the emotional and epistemological impact of food as a fount and agent of transnational and transgenerational memory, Kay is inspired by an intersectional aesthetic that refuses both essentialisms and easy hybridity fixes, choosing instead a perspective that is grounded in dialogism, endorses mutual reflexivity, and could best be defined as interstitial.

Objects of mourning: the afterlives of things

In the following sections of this study, I wish to enlarge upon this notion of an interstitial imagination by focusing on the enmeshments between subjects and objects of memory as loci of distributed grieving in Kay's prose fiction. My analysis will zoom in on *Trumpet*, a novel concerned with death and the "ethics of mournership" (Gana 43), but also a text that, like much of Kay's poetry, brings to the forefront the ways in which the intersecting axes of Blackness and Scottishness refigure, through acts of mnemonic retrieval, the rapport between the national and the transnational or between the local and the global. Most readings of *Trumpet* orbit around what Hargreaves calls its "humanist affirmations of constructions of selfhood" (2), interpreting what I regard as Kay's interstitial imagination through the lens of the manifold correlations between the

hybrid, spontaneous aesthetic of jazz and the sense of a mobile, untethered identity that exists in relation with others beyond divisions of gender and race (Rodríguez González 91-92; Homans 123). In my reading, however, the improvisatory nature of the jazz aesthetic, alternating melancholic legatos and piercing, frantic staccatos of pain, captures the aporetic logic of trauma, as it hovers between tellability and untellability and as it both enables and disables memorial acts. Influenced by perspectives on the co-extensive agencies of humans and nonhumans recently advanced by new materialist thinkers such as Bill Brown (thing theory), Maurizia Boscagli (stuff theory) and Mel Y Chen (animacy), my approach to Kay's representation of subject-object interactions detects a *posthumanist* impulse to factor in the ways in which material entities can give shape to structures of memory and heal the emotional gash of trauma.

The novel, which has been described as a "polyphonic memorialising of loss" (Hargreaves 3), pivots around the passing of a famous jazz musician, Joss/Josephine Moody, known as "Britain's legendary trumpet player" (*Trumpet* 6). Moody's Scottish-African lineage echoes Kay's own composite genealogies and the fact that the novel proposes an elegiac reconstruction of the disintegrative forces of grief reflects her belief that writing is a form of holding vigil for "a consciousness that death could have annihilated. Perhaps being close to death gives you an empathy with the darker side and introduces you to an imaginative world that is quite different" ("The SRB" 8). The novel's structure – a string of longer or shorter vignettes articulating a collective, transindividual narrative of mourning – mirrors the author's conviction that grief can be affectively disseminated, as Boscagli claims, not just among humans but among the objects they come into contact with as well (*Stuff Theory* 12, 142). The subject matter is also inspired by the real case of American jazz band leader Billy Tipton, née Dorothy Lucille Tipton, whose posthumously disclosed transvestism sparked a media frenzy in the 1990s, raising ethical concerns about the way in which the dis- and misremembrance of the dead is contingent on a shift from practices of interiorised, private mourning to public displays of bereavement in societies of the spectacle (Smith).

This makes *Trumpet* simultaneously a work of mourning for a death whose significance was distorted by public discourse and a thanatography, in the sense defined by Seán Hand: a form of autobiography predicated on a “splitting of the self” (185) which enables one to contemplate one’s “unknowable, unliveable personal death” (185) by chronicling the “death of others” (186). Subtending the ethical arc of the narrative is, however, a preoccupation to memorialise not just the human but also the nonhuman “others,” that is, the objects that remain imprinted in the survivors’ consciousness as custodians of memory (Gibson 185). At the crux of Kay’s polyhedral narrative – which alternates the private viewpoints of Millie/Millicent MacFarlane, Moody’s widow, Colman, his son, Edith Moore, his mother, Big Red McCall, the drummer of his band, and May Hart, Josephine Moore’s school girlfriend, with the impersonal or dismissive gaze of the legal, medical or media establishments – is the idea that things have a capacity to act as conduits of recollection for people dealing with traumatic loss and to mediate the “narrative configurations of mourning” (Gana 10). Disclosing the ethical premises of mourning practices, the “objects of the dead” (Gibson 1-2) may thwart attempts to perturb the work of memory or, on the contrary, they may deliver relief to those who are still alive.

In putting forth a poetics of bereavement, concentrated in a testamentary letter that is passed from father to adopted son and contains their dead precursor’s story of diasporic migration to the “ghost country” (*Trumpet* 271), Kay’s novel achieves the symmetric reverse of *The Adoption Papers* (1991), a poetic drama about burgeoning life, staged as a trialogue between the feminine participants in an adoption scenario. Whereas in the dramatic text, the women’s interlacing voices build up a loud, tense celebration of life and drown the harsh tones of officialdom encoded in “the original birth certificate” and other adoption documents (14), the novel unfolds not so much a therapeutics as a “*therapoetics* of prosopopoeia” (Gana 30) and documents how different objects that used to belong to the dead musician bear witness to the survivors’ endeavours to conjure Joss’s voice from beyond the grave – a voice that could not have reached Colman had it not been recorded in the testamentary letter, which is the ultimate “memory object in a culture deeply centred upon

forgetfulness” (Boscagli, *Stuff Theory* 211). Here is an intensely evocative passage from Joss’s confession, stressing his realisation that the material archive this letter comprises both haunts and exceeds future endeavours to summon up his presence:

Maybe you will understand, maybe you won’t. I knew you’d come here. I knew you would come looking for *stuff*. I’ve left it all for you, my letters, photographs, records, documents, certificates. It is all here. Mine and your own. I sat down here this morning all set to destroy all of this. Burn the lot. I stopped myself. If I do that I’d literally be burning myself. I couldn’t do that to myself, to my music. But most of all, I couldn’t do it to you. I thought to myself, who could make sense of all this? Then I thought of you. I am leaving myself to you. (Kay, *Trumpet* 276-277)

Prosopopoeia is a trope whose dialectic interplay between “figuration and disfiguration” underprops autobiography as the “fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave” (de Man 926-927). It also epitomises the asymmetrical “relations between the living and the dead and between the mourner and the mournee” (Gana 124), opening the possibility to signify loss through different mediums of narrativised memory. The life stories Joss has etched into paper, itself a form of perishable matter, will only be accessible to his son through this letter, which, while capable of “maintain[ing] memory independently of a perceiving subject” (Boscagli, *Stuff Theory* 208), sustains the prosopopoeial prospect of the father’s voice being rearticulated in the son’s consciousness with each act of rereading. As Joss writes to Colman, “I will be your son now in a strange way. You will be my father telling or not telling my story” (Kay, *Trumpet* 277).

Recourse to the consoling force of prosopopoeia (Gana 30) illustrates the whole spectrum of psycho-emotional reactions to Joss’s death: from Millie’s inconsolable devastation, which would come close to Freud’s definition of trauma-induced melancholia (243), to Colman’s “mournability” (Gana 10) or his gradually discovered ability to carry out the work of mourning by way of apostrophes to Joss’s things. *Trumpet* thus throws into relief what Bill Brown describes as the “social afterlife of things” (“All Thumbs” 457), by reference to Appadurai’s theory about the transactional life of objects. At one point in the novel, for instance, Maggie the cleaner recalls one item amid the hoard of cosmopolitan

souvenirs in the Moodys' home bearing testimony to Joss's international touring: "huge Russian dolls, those ones that hide inside each other" (Kay, *Trumpet* 173). The nesting dolls translate into material terms the interconnective role of artifacts, helping Millie to convey to Maggie her own sense of relational, intersubjective identity: "We've all got lots of little people inside us" (173).

As Brown argues, while things that endure past catastrophe may promote distillations of meaning or act as bolsters to human subjectivity, their involvement in psycho-emotional recovery processes exposes "the extension of consciousness and agency to nonhuman objects" ("All Thumbs" 457). Obeying or resisting the entropic pull triggered by the death of Joss Moody, the material residues of his life allow his figure – the absent centre of the narrative – to be textu(r)ally recreated from the interlacing, sometimes mismatched memory threads the mourners are hanging on to in their effort to counter loss. For instance, battling a bout of amnesia relating to the cause of Joss's death, Big Red McCall savagely punches, "dents and winds and batters the fuck out of his useless pillow" (Kay, *Trumpet* 151) until he starts shedding tears, in a case of deferred wailing that is, at last, unblocked by a household object turned unruly thing. Brown's theorising of thingness as the capacity of matter to convey sentience, precipitate memory and transmit emotion is predicated on the idea that to the extent that matter is pliable to human will, it passes unnoticed, but as soon as it ceases to be submissive and function routinely, it springs into the field of attention and presses for its liveliness to be acknowledged:

As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things. ... A thing, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us. ("Thing Theory" 4)

Brown's idea of suspending categorical distinctions between human and nonhuman materiality may explain why, in Kay's narrative, the prosopopoeic mechanism permits the substitution of Joss as the lost object of affection with metonymic equivalents, things that are invested with

vitality or what Chen calls animacy – a quality of sensate awareness that cuts across the animate/inanimate divide in ways that “trouble and undo stubborn binary systems of difference, including dynamism/stasis, life/death, subject/object” (3). While Chen’s political interrogation of the volatile boundaries between life and death is aimed at dismantling the systemic forms of “dehumanisation and objectification” (45) inherent in biopower, my analysis retains the idea that the animacy, agency or liveness of things can be “coarticulated with humanity” (159) in such a way as to draw attention to their “interactionist ontology” (210). To take a relevant scene from a chapter called “Music,” which focuses on a jazz performance, the trumpet of Kay’s title explodes into frantic unity with Joss, forming a human-nonhuman aggregate of animacy that nearly dematerialises itself into a “whirlwind” of “musical circles” (Kay, *Trumpet* 131). Joined to his “leather lips,” to his “satchelmouth” (131), the trumpet comes to life as it drives Joss into an ecstatic “swirling and whirling” (131) that allows his vitality to expand across the diasporic chronotope of his ancestry and futurity, as well as to partake of an interstitial vision that exposes the fungibility and co-extensivity of all opposites:

So when he takes off he is the whole century galloping to its close. The wide moors. The big mouth. Scotland. Africa. Slavery. Freedom. He is a girl. A man. Everything, nothing. He is sickness, health. The sun. The moon. Black, white. Nothing weighs him down. Not the past or the future. He hangs on to the high C and then he lets go. (136)

While the instrumental symbiosis between artist and artifact in the passage above is aligned with the transparency of objects in Brown’s discussion of manageable materiality, the fragment below exhibits the disruptive thingness of the trumpet, which, separated from its owner, is now fated to display the obsolescence of stuff:

When I open up the trumpet in its box, it stares out at me, using its dumb keys for eyes. It looks sad. Unplayed. It looks like it is saying to me, where has all the jazz gone? Where is my master? I put my lips to its tight gold mouth. But I can’t make a sound. I put it back, laying it down in its furry case. It is lifeless. I shove it under my bed, the battered case. (Kay, *Trumpet* 239)

As one of the vectors that connect the griever and the grieved, the trumpet is no longer an object of resonance, nor is it yet discardable waste. It drifts between animacy and inanimacy, it glides between the visual and the tactile, but is no longer capable of producing sound. In Millie's eyes, it is personified stuff that looks lively enough to inspire empathy and warrant prosopopoeic interpellation. However, it is also much too "lifeless" to be taken out of its tattered box and may eventually be discarded like many other obsolete commodities.

Expanding on Brown's distinction between the instrumental usefulness of objects and the intractable recalcitrance of things, Boscagli's approach to stuff calls attention to changing relations between humans and the materiality of the world that is vastly exacerbated by "new types of technology, new forms of capital, and a new sense of the planet's finitude" (*Stuff Theory* 1-2). Simply put, stuff is matter that escapes the dichotomous frames of thingness/objecthood. It is disposable matter that is nonetheless not disposed of, not relegated to the category of waste or garbage simply because its "plasticity, its transformative potential, comes into being, inextricably, with the human" (2). In Boscagli's view, stuff – objects that one has difficulty in letting go of since they are connected to the human subject "in ways that are intensely intimate, somatic, and unpredictable" (3) – belongs to a register of materiality that is emotionally and not just epistemologically entwined with the human:

All this stuff is protean, volatile, always on the verge of becoming valueless while never ceasing to be commodified, awash with meaning but always ready to become junk or to mutate into something else. Its instability in the everyday makes the conventional split between subject and object impossible. (3)

In Boscagli's account, stuff brings into plain view the ontological continuum between "friable subjects" and "mutable objects" (3) and discloses the "affective economies" in which they participate by virtue of the shared material vulnerabilities ("Objects to Stuff"). Within the context of bereavement described in *Trumpet*, the survivors' struggle to process Joss's irreversible absence entails the need to heed the objects of mourning – clothing or furniture that still bears the shape or scent of the

deceased – as stuff whose “animacy” (Chen) presses for a deferral of its relegation to the status of discardable waste. In Kay’s view, stuff’s relational ontology – what Boscagli calls “becoming-with-things” (“Objects to Stuff”) – concerns not just a continuum of animacy between corporeality and the world’s materiality. It also involves structures of subject-object reciprocal care that transform a Freudian economy of mourning, based on an efficient praxis of working through grief, into an ecology of mourning, dispersed across “human-nonhuman collectives (Bennett xix).

By virtue of their tactility and tangibility, the bandages Joss used to conceal his breasts underneath his attire illustrate the agentive force of “matter-as-remembrance” (Boscagli, *Stuff Theory* 31) in binding the bereaved to the mourned and in steering Millie across the whole spectrum of grief, from anguish to succour. The novel leads to a rethinking of stuff as conducive to modes of immersive reflection on the past in ways that shatter the codes underwriting the interaction of humans with objects, particularly if those objects fall outside the fast cycles of consumerist consumption (Boscagli, *Stuff Theory* 101). To Millie, Joss’s bandages are reminders of the liveness of a corporeality that once needed redefinition to fit a differently articulated body image. For the lovers, however, the bandages were intimately bound up not only with the body and the everyday gestures of attaching to it this second layer of textile skin (the torso around which they were draped, the hands that wrapped and unwrapped them), but with the merged consciousness of the lovers, whose “hybrid materialities” (Boscagli, *Stuff Theory* 28) were bonded in symbiotic, tactile coexistence by these strips of cloth. Poised, prior to Joss’s death, between the sartorial and the epidermal in the everyday ritual of getting dressed, the bandages functioned not so much as a supplement to skin but as a psychic link between the lovers, enhancing the semiotic density of Kay’s representation of their relation.

After Joss’s death, Millie’s nostalgic deferral of separation from loss drives her to seek different forms of proximity to Joss’s bandages, which, like relics, provide her with the emotional and corporeal comfort of touch. At a later point in the narrative, she remembers sleeping with them underneath her pillow despite this causing her to re-experience pain

within loops of senseless repetition: “I live the same day again and again and again and again” (239). At the same time, she finds consolation in preserving the fabric that once pulsed with life since it afforded her most intimate contact with Joss’s heart:

I have some of his bandages here at Torr. I don’t know what to do with them. I can’t throw them away. I can’t give away these bandages. I can’t burn them or bury them or throw them into the dustbin. They are in the top drawer of my chest of drawers here along with my white cotton underwear. They lie in there curled and sleeping like a small harmless animal. They smell of him still. They smell of his music; the peat smell of jazz. I have the bandages and I have his golden trumpet, his mouth pieces, his battered old box, his last flyer announcing his glorious return for a week at Ronnie Scott’s. These are the most personal things I have. (Kay, *Trumpet* 238-9)

Oscillating between concealment and revelation, the bandages exude a sense of indefinite, mournful wistfulness and, because of Joss’s urging of Millie to “remember the bandages” (203), they become the very substance of memory in the narrative. Memory’s multiply enfolded layers is replicated in their crouched, somewhat animated contours. Their soft feel and malleable shapes diffuse the threadbare “vitality of matter” (Bennett vii), a vitality that also tends to linger on in the intimate, domestic space at Torr long after it is voided of its owner’s presence.

As shown above, an ecology of mourning implies at least two aspects regarding the adherence of stuff to memory. On the one hand, it pushes for a notion that objects of mourning are not just compliant tools for connecting the dead to the living – what Gibson calls “liminal” or “transitional objects,” “mediating between ‘I’ and ‘you’, ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘here’ and ‘there’” (Gibson 197) – but material nodes around which the work of mourning accrues its significance, influencing the course of grieving through the psycho-emotional experiences they enable in humans. On the other hand, within an ecological framework, the objects associated with the dead – the stuff or clutter they leave behind – call to be mourned themselves, encouraging reflection on what Tischleder calls the “parallel biographies of people and things” (26): the different lifespans of animate and inanimate matter but their similar vulnerability to destruction (42).

To Albert Holding, the funeral director fascinated with the image of dignified death from the *Duchess of Malfi*, the strips of cloth unravelled from Joss’s body are lifeless and emotionless appendages, resembling the “bandages of an Egyptian mummy” (Kay, *Trumpet* 110). To Doctor Krishnamurty, empathy with the suffering Joss went through means that “each wrapping of bandage that she peeled off felt unmistakably like a layer of skin” (43), but this thingly animacy – “the bandage lying curled on the bed like a snake” (44) – is intensified after she interferes with Joss’s gender self-definition by marking “female” on his death certificate. In contrast with these official responses to the detritus of the dead, Millie’s attitude is to save Joss’s stuff from entropic decay and keep company to the material traces of his life for as long as it takes to internalise the lessons of stuff’s relational “elegiac ontology” (Boscagli, *Stuff Theory* 229): “Many women know the shape, the smell, the colour of loss. Many women have aged with loss. Grief has changed the face of many women. I am not alone” (Kay, *Trumpet* 203). In their turn, the material remnants of Joss Moody’s life do not act as inert bystanders of Millie’s struggle to integrate loss but fuel her metabolism of grieving in the Torr family cottage, a place that also functions as an archive of family heirlooms and that, with hindsight, appears to have always already anticipated loss:

The cottage seemed as if it possessed a memory of its own, one of those memories that remembers the distant past better than the recent. It clung to smells of people who’d lived here years ago. The rug was worn down to the bone. The paintings on the walls were old oils by local artists with plain titles. Fishing Nets. Mist on Sea. Early morning, Kepper. Only one title disturbed me, Skeleton. A watercolour of an abandoned fish on the beach. I remembered it from when I was a child. I stared at the shape of the bones. I could see how simple it would be to choke to death. There were large cobwebs everywhere, hanging from corner to corner like fishing nets. (7)

Outlasting Joss’s existence, the domestic interior in Torr, with its skeletal imagery and its tattered artworks, projects material meshes between past and present, protecting the stuff amassed by many generations of inhabitants. Harbours not just individual recollections, but the cultural memory of the entire Scottish community, the Torr cottage offers a haven

to Millie, whose reeling grief gradually subsides as she learns to protect the environs she was about to desert and to hold on to the objects of mourning she was about to discard. The solace that perishable stuff imparts to vulnerable griever in Kay's narrative lays bare the structures of feeling embedded in memory objects and their power to awaken reciprocal emotions of care in humans.

Souvenirs and keepsakes: the "thing-power" to remember

Throughout the novel, images of emotional engagement between subjects and objects shed light on Kay's Latourian insight that humans may feel, reminisce, and grieve *about* subjects but also *with* objects. This is visible in the novel's motto, which speaks of the longing to retrieve the tangled energies of humans and of the objects that enabled their bodily choreographies through space:

The way you wear your hat;
The way you sip your tea,
The memory of all that –
No, no! They can't take that away from me! (*Trumpet*, front page)

Marked as indelible in the Gershwin lyrics, this image conceptually links the memorability of humans and nonhumans and foregrounds the trope of nostalgic desire not for some abstract idea of love lost, but for particular ways of interaction between human and nonhuman materialities. The memory of the beloved is inextricably connected to an item of clothing or to a beverage sip, ordinary items that come very close to what Steven Connor defines as "magical objects" (*Paraphernalia* 2). These, far from exhibiting supernatural powers, are everyday objects that somehow eschew their "finitude" and acquire the "miracle of animation" (Connor 2) in their emotional (prosopopoeic) transactions with humans.

In another of the many scenes enacting the affective respite afforded by objects of memory in Kay's novel, a poignant reference punctuating Colman's deep yet resentful suffering is to his late father's strong attachment to "Scottish things, daft naff Scottish things" (*Trumpet* 139). Caught up in a vortex of emotions (dejection, caused by his father's

passing, and rejection, since he believes he is a victim of parental deceit), Colman plunges himself into what Gana calls a "foreclosure of mourning, an obstinate refusal to submit to what one is literally exposed and submitted to" (49). Unable to grieve, he lapses into an infantile disposition and starts leafing through "old copies of *Oor Wullie* and *The Broons*" (139). The Scottish comic strips jolt him out of his denial of pain and pull him closer to reconnecting with an early memory of his father. In his hotel room, as he ponders allowing journalist Sophie Stones to ghost-write and hijack his narrative of grief, touching those comics makes him vividly remember Joss's fondness for swathes of edible Scottish souvenirs – "packets of tattie scones, slices of square sausage, bottles of Barrs irn bru. Shortbread. Black bun" (139). He also recollects how Joss would insist on bringing these keepsakes back from their trips to the remote coastal village of Torr in the hope that they would strengthen his family's emotional ties to Scotland.

As remainders (or reminders) of his childhood pastimes, the old issues of comic strips – printed in Scots and giving off a nostalgic whiff of parochialism and patriarchalism – are far from lifeless objects maintaining their separateness from the reminiscing subject. Associated with rites of passage, they exemplify Margaret Gibson's notion of "transitional objects" and serve as "means of both holding on and letting go" of the past (34). By preventing the image of Joss from fading into oblivion, the comic strips exhibit what Jane Bennet calls "thing-power," seen as the "curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (32). Harking back to the time of Colman's first encounters with popular artefacts, the cartoons act as enticements to remembrance, showing how the work of mourning may be rendered both possible and compulsory by material traces of animacy. To think of "matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert," Bennet reminds us, would mean ignoring the "capacity of things ... not only to impede or block the will and design of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (9-10). The comic strips do not play into Colman's yearning for quick consumerist gratification. Instead of enabling his plunge into self-willed amnesia, they interrupt his anomie with the imperative to recall his father and pay his

last respects to him, inviting attention, at the same time, to the impermanent poise of memory objects between the sublimation and reification of desire, or between authentic artifacts and fetishised reproductions.

Salvaged from the vanishing object world of the past, the comic strips reflect the foundering architecture of Colman's emotions. They exemplify how processes of memory are inevitably mediated by the things that surround us, even as the emotional wreckage set off by trauma is reflected in the material debris that used to witness the vibrant presence of the loved one. However, as Bennet puts it, the "thing-power of the debris" is "but a function of subjective and intersubjective connotations, memories, and affects" (10). In Kay's novel, "thing-power" translates as the vitality of waste, trash, relics, and other residual objects that give shape to, on the one hand, traces of the departed in a world that is breaking down and, on the other hand, catalysts of memory that can pulse life back into the minds of the grieving subjects. In their power to synchronously recall the figure of the dead father and his mnemonic strategies designed to keep his London-based family "in touch" (139) with their Scottishness, the comic strips are more than just a material form of memory activation for Colman, who is left to cope, in the aftermath of Joss's death, with the shattered reliquary of his fatherhood and nationhood ideals. The comic leaflets Colman chooses to browse, instead of watching a new series of the global Star Trek franchise on TV, become emotional substitutes for an obsolete pattern of Scottish family life, which, in his view, should have shaped his relationship with his father and buttressed his own emergent notions of masculinity. The Glenfiddich malt Colman accustoms his palate to, at the expense of the "Jack Daniel's or Bell's or Teacher's or any other common stuff" (212-213), alerts us to a similar immersion into affective contiguity between the elegiac and the nostalgic, or between irreparable and recuperable loss that the objectual regime makes possible for the young man.

In addition to casting mourning as a process that unfolds at the interface between humans and things, what the hotel scene also heaves into view is the ethical obligation that memory objects linked to family and nation pose to son and father, tethering them to collective networks of

identity. These both evoke and subvert traditional views of kinship and community, which are redefined in keeping with the mobility and hybridity made possible by adoption and migration as elements that disrupt the linearity of the genealogical narrative (Jackson 102). Nestled within one another, the son's retrospective memory and the father's prospective memory reveal a form of shared agency that is specific to what Bennet calls "human-nonhuman assemblages" (19) and to what Latour proposes as "quasi-objects, quasi-subjects," that is, a compositionist frame for the emergence and proliferation of hybrid ontologies (51). Colman's nostalgic recollection of his father's obsession with all things Scots and Joss's projected relish of souvenirs that could bolster his family's Scottish sentiment speak to a recognition of the ways in which even ordinary items of consumerist culture like comic strips and packaged heritage foods – "quasi-objects" working as "astonishing constructors of intersubjectivity" (Connor, "Thinking" 4) – can consolidate the architecture of remembrance and give texture to the matter of memory.

Kay's critique of conventional objects of memory becomes apparent not so much in her suggestion that outworn symbols of Scottishness can be instilled with new life to generate firm affinities with nationhood, but in her commentary on the epistemological and mnemonic limits of photographs. To start with, the newspaper pictures in which she has difficulty recognising herself at the beginning of the narrative make her "look unlike the memory of myself" (Kay, *Trumpet* 1). Moreover, in the novel, most of the photographs people use to aid their fading memory confirm the realisation that the *stuff* of life somehow remains unsymbolised within their frames:

Sometimes you remember your life in photographs that were never taken. ... I wish we hadn't posed all the time, holding up a fish and a smile. It makes us look unreal, as if we were acting. Look at this one: Joss and Colman, playing at being chieftains. Colman has a tartan tammy on his head and a stick. Joss has our tartan blanket wrapped round his shoulders. I remember Joss joking that day, telling Colman that they were Black Jacobbeans, that they could fight in any battle. (99)

What unleashes a barrage of conflicting feelings, from solace to sorrow, is the staged, performed quality of the pose. "Photographs," Gibson reminds

us, disclose the “discontinuity of memory, the elisions and gaps, without filling these in” (86). Millie is aware that the photographic reproduction of the “Black Jacobean” – a nod to the Caribbean revolutionaries and to the centuries-old history of Black Scotland – can only fail to preserve the lived experience of her family, a family whose nonfiliative kinship eventually surpasses and displaces the need for blood ties with what Rodríguez González calls “emotional genealogies” (98).

To conclude, while the novel has been convincingly read as an attempt to articulate a Black diasporic cultural memory that welds transnational or cosmopolitan perspectives into a strong sense of Scottishness (Jackson 99), both Joss’s use of material culture tokens to give tangible form to his Scottish allegiances and Colman’s reawakened Scottish pride upon his return to Torr could be critiqued for their ostensibly unreflective participation in inauthentic strands of iconographic nationalism (98). However, interrogating the implications of such a stance through the filter of stuff theory shows that it is possible for commodities, such as souvenirs, to escape the flat cycles of consumerism and grant the subject an emotional grasp of cultural identity. Not least, in seeking to cope with the pain of separation from places or people, the subjects of Kay’s interstitial imagination align themselves with the matter of memory in forging renewed relations with the textures and fabrics of the world.

Works Cited

- Appadurai, Arjun. *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.
- Bennet, Jane. *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010.
- Boscagli, Maurizia. *Stuff Theory. Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- . “Objects to Stuff and Back: Materiality, Value, and the Politics of the Ordinary.” *Roots & Routes: Research on Visual Cultures* 17 (2015). Web. 15 July 2021.
- Brown, Matthew. “In/outside Scotland: Race and Citizenship in the Work of Jackie Kay.” *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*. Ed. Berthold Schoene. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007. 219-226.
- Brown, Bill. “All Thumbs.” *Critical Inquiry* 30. 2 (2004): 452-457.
- . “Thing Theory.” *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 1-22.

- Chen, Mel Y. *Animacies. Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Durham: Duke UP, 2012.
- Connor, Steven. *Paraphernalia. The Curious Lives of Magical Things*. London: Profile Books, 2011.
- Connor, Steven. "Thinking Things." *Textual Practice* 24.1 (2010): 1-20.
- De Man, Paul. "Autobiography as De-facement." *MLN: Comparative Literature* 94.5 (1979): 919-930.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV. Trans. James Strachey. London: The Hogarth P, 1957. 243-258.
- Gana, Nouri. *Signifying Loss. Towards a Poetics of Narrative Mourning*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2011.
- Gibson, Margaret. *Objects of the Dead. Mourning and Memory in Everyday Life*. Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2008.
- Goyal, Yogita. *Runaway Genres. The Global Afterlives of Slavery*. New York: New York UP, 2019.
- Hand, Seán. "Thanatography: non-being as the limit of autobiography." *Michel Leiris: Writing the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. 185-201.
- Hargreaves, Tracy. "The power of the ordinary subversive in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*." *Feminist Review* 74 (2003): 2-16.
- Homans, Margaret. "Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*: Transnational and Transracial Adoption, Transgender Identity, and Fictions of Transformation." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 39.1 (2020): 123-150.
- Jackson, Joseph H. *Writing Black Scotland. Race, Nation and the Devolution of Black Britain*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2020.
- Jenkins, Lee M. "Interculturalism: Imtiaz Dharker, Patience Agbabi, Jackie Kay and contemporary Irish poets." *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry*. Ed. Jane Dowson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011. 119-135.
- Kay, Jackie. *Trumpet*. London: Picador, 1998.
- . "In My Country." *Other Lovers*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1993. 24.
- . "Kail and Callaloo." *Charting the Journey. Writings by Black and Third World Women*. Ed. S. Grewal, J. Kay, L. Landor, G. Lewis and P. Parmar. London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1988. 195-197.
- . "Jackie Kay." *Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets*. Ed. Gillean Somerville-Arjat and Rebecca E. Wilson. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990. 120-130.
- . "Scotland's Makar Jackie Kay: This is still my country, but it needs to change." *The Sunday Post*. 7 June 2020. Web. 22 June 2021.
- . *The Adoption Papers*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991.
- . "The SRB Interview: Jackie Kay." *The Scottish Review of Books*. 21 March 2016. Web. 25 June 2021.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Nairn, Tom. *The Break-Up of Britain. Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1977.

- Niven, Alastair. "New Diversity, Hybridity and Scottishness." *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature Volume Three: Modern Transformations: New Identities (from 1918)*. Eds. Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Susan Manning, and Murray Pittock. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007. 320-331.
- Rodríguez González, Carla. "Biographical Improvisation in Jackie Kay's Trumpet." *Scottish Studies Review* 8.1 (2007): 88-100.
- Rowell, Charles Henry. "An Interview with Jackie Kay." *Callaloo* 37. 2 (2014): 268-280. Web. 6 Feb. 2021
- Roy, Parama. "Postcolonial Tastes." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Food*. Ed. J. Michelle Coghlan. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2020. 161-181.
- Smith, Ali. "Ali Smith on Trumpet by Jackie Kay: a jazzy call to action." *The Guardian*. 16 Jan. 2016. Web. 23 June 2021.
- Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.
- Tischleder, Babette Bärbel. *The Literary Life of Things. Case Studies in American Fiction*. Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014.