The Agency of Matter in Brian Castro's *The Garden Book*[1]

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Abstract: This paper examines the non-human actants in Brian Castro's novel *The Garden Book*, including nature, the human body, and human artifacts in light of Jane Bennett's theory of vibrant matter and Castro's own arguments about the status of objects. Castro subverts the life-matter binary in this novel, giving attentiveness and respect to material powers, as well as affect and empathy to objects, thus undermining anthropocentrism. In a pandemic era in which humans and non-humans are seen as more interconnected than ever, such empowerment and understanding are not only significant, but also necessary to build a harmonized community.

Keywords: agency of matter, non-human actant, life-matter binary, empathy

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Jane Bennett's work *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* is an influential exploration of philosophy, the universe, politics, and ethics, focusing on non-human forces, especially the agency of matter. She believes that there is a "Thing-Power: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6). Such an idea coincides with Castro who always feels sentimental and empathetic with objects around him so melancholically that he has "to leave cupboards, fridges, windows, doors, drawers, all open for everything to be flooded with light and attention, otherwise they move him [me] to sorrow (Castro, "Detours" 1).

Borrowing from Theodor Adorno's concept of "negative dialectics," Bennett argues: "Humans encounter a world in which nonhuman materialities have power, a power that the 'bourgeois I,' with its pretensions to autonomy, denies" (16). In order to avoid both anthropocentrism and biocentrism, Bennett suggests that "one source of the energy required is a love of the world or an enchantment with a world of vital materiality" (127). Castro also emphasizes that love is the cure: "the metaphor of love as cure—not love-sickness, but love-cure—this is the positive side of my idea of melancholy" (Ma and Li, "Artistic" 62).

Considering the theories of Hans Driesch and Henri Bergson (the latter strongly influenced by

Kant in his life/matter binary), Bennett concludes that "neither fully sheds Kant's image of inert matter" (65). She agrees with Mario Perniola's idea of "the sex appeal of the inorganic" by engaging with "an irrational love of matter" whose vitality she believes to be "shimmering," "violent," and "intrinsic" and that does not need an "animating accessory" (61). It is in her interpretation of matter vitality in terms of a heterogeneous assemblage that Bennett shares with Brian Castro the belief that there is a connectedness between humans and objects (things), and that such a relation can be more productive if human beings treat things with affect, empathy, and respect. Both understandings can find support in Karen Barad's rejection of the essential separateness of "word and thing," "human and non- human," and "discourse and matter." Barad proposes that we are "intraactively (re) constituted as part of the world's becoming." In other words, we are only "a part of that nature we seek to understand" (Barad 828).

Combining what Deleuze and Guattari call "an assemblage (ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts)" with Spinoza's term "conative (affective) bodies," Bennett argues that "bodies enhance their power in or as a heterogeneous assemblage" (23). Inspired and guided by such understandings, she is able to "highlight some of the limitations in human-centered theories of action and to investigate some of the practical implications, for social-science inquiry and for public culture, of a theory of action and responsibility that crosses the human-nonhuman divide" (24). In her book, she thus deals with "the affect of technologies, winds, vegetables, minerals" (61), arguing that a "vital materiality" runs through and across bodies, both human and nonhuman, and that it is the task of the author to recognize that agency. Her argument provides an example of green materialist eco-philosophy thus enlightens the authors of this paper and enables them to detect matter and their corresponding actant agency in Castro's novel *The Garden Book*.

Castro is the author of 12 novels including *Birds of Passage, Double-Wolf, After China, Stepper, Shanghai Dancing, The Garden Book, The Bath Fugues*, and *Street to Street*. Born in Hong Kong with Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, French, and English heritage, with a strong love of and acquired taste in both French and Chinese culture, Castro has won many awards in Australia including the Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction, the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction, and the NSW Premiers Book of the Year Award. *The Garden Book* won the Queensland Premiers Award for Fiction and was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award. It retells the story of the 18th-century Chinese poet He Shuangqing. Two centuries later, He Shuangqing is revived as the novel's heroine, Swan He, daughter of a Chinese teacher living and teaching in the Dandenong Ranges in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. Having to quit her university studies due to her family's poverty which was a consequence of her father's job being endangered by racism, Swan becomes a teacher in order to replace her father, who is unable to retain enough of his students to be paid. After getting married to Darcy, a local bushman who is brutal and provincial, Swan writes poems on leaves in solitude, because like He Shuangqing "she wanted to leave nothing of herself or her writing behind" (Brennan 30). In a sense, the leaf poems are vehicles for her release, providing the comfort and understanding which she fails to obtain from her marriage. Later during her marriage to Darcy, Swan loses a daughter, Penny. Tempted and used by the dashing American pilot Jasper, Swan falls in love with him and he in turn later translates and publishes Swan's poems

in Paris and America. In her later years, Swan is lonely and suffers from severe depression as a result of her failed love and loss of identity, thus she is considered by many to be a "mad Chinese woman"(Castro, *Garden* 310). Her entire story is pieced together and narrated by the collector Norman Shih, who works in the rare books department of the university library, and whose parents are presumably Swan and Jasper.

Previous research on *The Garden Book* has covered many different topics: Guanglin Wang, for instance, has examined the topic of cultural translation and Castro's role "as an agent of cultural transplantation" (*Translation* 38); Lili Ma and Jingfei Li have looked at Castro's deep concern with anti-racism and the causes and demonstrations of racism ("Anti-Racism" 95-100); Bernadette Brennan has analyzed the intertextuality of Castro's novel, showing the way that it intersects with writers like Walter Benjamin and Marcel Proust. "*The Garden Book* offers a collection of fragmentary detours via eighteenth century Chinese poetry, Proust, Heidegger, Benjamin, Virgil, Ovid, T. S. Eliot and Baudelaire (to mention a few)" (26); while Marilyne Brun has explored transgression, hybridity, polyphonia, cosmopolitanism and play, arguing that by doing so Castro "underlin[ing]s the central significance of grammar, ethics and aesthetics in his work" (24). Castro's other important novels have received critical attention from various angles: Beibei Chen has looked at themes of hybridity and cosmopolitan memory in *Shanghai Dancing* (269-280); Karen Barker foregrounds how Castro parodies Freud in *Double-Wolf* in "The Artful Man: Theory and Authority in Brian Castro's Fiction" (231-240); Wang Guanglin examines the appropriation of Eastern and Western cultures in *After China* ("Fragmentation", 44-55); while Lurong Liu and Zhong Huang collaborate to explore the smellscape in Castros' two novels *Birds of Passage* and *After China* using the theory of liminality, pointing out that "the transgressive power" of such " liminal smellscapes" "can dismantle the rigid boundary between race and class, between fantasy and reality, as well as between the sexual and creative desires" (63). No critics, however, have yet analyzed the agency of matter with regard to Castro's work.

Challenging the dichotomy between life and matter, Bennett draws attention to "the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations" (vii), highlighting "what is typically cast in the shadow: the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite human things" (ix). Emphasizing the capacity of agency of material, Bennett goes on to argue, "I will emphasize, even overemphasize, the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and inhuman artifacts) in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought" (xvi). Borrowing the term "actant" from Bruno Latour, Bennett writes, "an actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (viii) and "Actant and operator are substitute words for what in a more subject-centered vocabulary are called agents" (9). Bennett's theory helps the reader to understand Castro's own ideas about how objects are also taken into consideration in order to interpret *The Garden Book*. Castro claims, for instance, that his attachment to objects "is an interiority that could *not* be explained away psychologically in *babble* such as fear of abandonment, punishment anxiety, claustrophobia, agoraphobia, legendary psychasthenia, over-empathy, inability to deal with spaces, etc." (Castro, "Detours" 1; emphasis added). Rather, for him, "fragments, like objects when placed side by side, begin to form

connections [. . .] connectedness between people, things, memories and writings depend upon a certain field of *affect* and *empathy*" (3; emphasis added). Castro's "connectedness between people, things, memories and writings" echoes Bennett's concept of "heterogeneous assemblage" that can "make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events," a point that demands further detailed analysis.

We can see in *The Garden Book* that other non-human actants are also empowered apart from the main characters depicted, speaking their own stories and gaining significant places. Therefore, this paper will interpret the agency of matter from the perspectives of nature, the human body, and artifacts, demonstrating in detail what difference they can make and what effects they can produce in combination with the act of characters. At the same time, Castro's own concern with objects will be tentatively deciphered and his idea of connections analyzed.

1. Nature: Animal Narrative

In this section, the material power of nature is explored mainly through animal narratives. Animal narratives correspond, in a sense, to Donna Haraway's concept of "companion species" (12), and challenge the idea that there is an inherent distinction between humans and animals, thus rendering the latter as the Other. In addition, Castro writes in the book that "Eternity makes everyone an animal" (*Garden* 138), hinting at the coming together of all species, an idea that echoes as well Bennett's concept of "heterogeneous assemblage." Several animals will be analyzed in detail, including quails, dogs, horses, and lyrebirds, which correspond—somewhat randomly—to the main characters in the book: Swan, Baba, Darcy, and Jasper. Castro gives these animals the capacity for agency in their entanglement with their respective human characters. Consequently, the animal qualities reinforce the character's personality among a flock of people of different nationalities and dispositions, sometimes acting as the vehicle onto which a character's empathy and ambition are projected, sometimes serving as the spokesperson of the character's love and hate, and sometimes allegorizing a character's hypocrisy and falsity beneath his apparent talent. Combined and acting together, animals and humans form an integrity and thus co-produce different effects.

Obviously, the image of the quail stands for and acts with the heroine Swan, who is as "[s]ensitive as a quail. Looking hurt when race is mentioned. I quit that word after a while, seeing as how it upset her" (101). This line is from Darcy when he first encounters Swan, and thus lays the foundation for his initial impression of her character. Swan is represented as sensitive, not only because she is a poetess, but also because she is Chinese living in Australia. Here, equating her quail image with her cultural identity indicates that her personal character reflects these aspects of her culture. Overall, the quail is mentioned five times in the book. For example, Castro writes: "One day a small quail knocked itself about flying into the glass. The bird swirled about on its back for a while and then a sparrowhawk descended and tore off its feathers and then patiently waited and bored into its belly, one small rip at a time" (26). Here, the smallness and fragility of a quail are depicted, and Swan's tragic fate is foreshadowed. In addition, the bigger sparrowhawk may signify Jasper, since he is a pilot, diving from above and devouring Swan's passion and love. Swan's

personal identity and cultural identity are both vulnerable, threatened by the attack of the wider, non-Chinese community.

Another relevant quotation is from when Norman reluctantly agrees to publicize Swan's posthumous scripts and letters, "I agree to the exhibition. So I become a commodity. I too, have devalued spirits, experiences, for the emptiness of this paper publicity. I bury the dead without mourning. Quails, which have flown into my glass" (293). Here Norman's burial of his mother (whom he refers to as a "quail") "without mourning" echoes Jacques Lacan's idea about mourning: "The object of mourning derives its importance for us from a certain identification relationship that Freud attempted to define most precisely with the term 'incorporation'" (Zhang et al. 246). As soon as the object of mourning (Swan) disappears, the subject (Norman) loses "the cause of desire," thus a gap occurs between such loss and the necessary mourning. The hole "provides the place for the projection of the missing signifier, which is essential to the structure of the Other" (247). Yet this signifier cannot be articulated because of its dependence on the Other. Therefore, it is suggested that Norman will depart from his mother with "insufficient mourning" (Zhang et al. 248), without identifying with her, beginning a new life with the new name Shih, which becomes a new signifier for him in the future life. Nonetheless, the image of the quail still possesses the power of agency even after death. It functions in the same way as Hamlet's father, who appears as a ghost "which can catch the soul of one and all unawares when someone's departure from this life has not been accompanied by the rites that it calls for" (247). This spirit originates from the mother, and gets passed on to her son, who refuses to accept it as a historical heritage. It may indicate that Chinese people living in Australia have a long way to go before they become stronger and more powerful.

Norman's generation can probably see more hope than the generations of Swan and Baba. Such tenacity is further shown in the quail, as depicted elsewhere in the book, "The beauty of this being reminded me of a quail which once flew into glass. Hurt by, but not disillusioned with its fate" (Castro, *Garden* 53). Swan is just like a quail: vulnerable, but very determined, challenging her fate as a woman as well as a minority. These attributes also give hope to the struggling Chinese in Australia, especially later generations. Another scene witnessing "quail" is associated with dying (299-300), which suggests that the heroine, as well as her cultural identity, might be endangered. Overall, the quail symbolizes Swan and her ethnicity: weak, sensitive, vulnerable, doomed to be attacked by the giant animal and powerful race. Flying or not, alive or dead, unseen or seen, the quail possesses agential power. Taking the last quotation as an example, the quail acquires the power of agency after death, a power that connects and disconnects mother and son, woman and man, the living and the dead. So it is no exaggeration to argue that the image of quail "has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (Bennett viii). Castro not only endows the heroine with power—the power to write—but also endows her symbol the quail with the ability of acting—as if making up what Swan cannot write in words, or expressing what Swan cannot even feel when she is in passionate love with Jasper. Here the agency of quail works together with the action of the heroine, co-producing and reinforcing their deprivation of power and love in a land that does not welcome them.

Apart from something organic, such as an animal, other non-human things are also significant in the novel, such as the leaves on which Swan writes her poetry (as did the 18th-century Chinese

poet He Shuangqing before her) in terms of their material agency. Brennan, for instance, argues that "Swan's use of leaves, and her insertion of them into other texts, makes her poetry literally intertextual" (30). In this sense, an object such as a leaf can also be given power even after its fall and death. Such agency reiterates the idea that "[s]he [Swan] was a random leaf" (Castro, *Garden* 244). All these aspects help to explain the complexity of Swan, who is undoubtedly the most important character in the book. So here we see the image of character and the one of leaves converge together, collaborating, and producing different effects, thus enhancing the character's depiction and deepening the theme of the novel.

The second character that can be discussed together with animal image is Swan's father Baba who represents a typical intellectual in the book. Giving his cat the name of Nero, Baba's attitude to animals is to personify them. His way of treating animals is more empathetic than those characters around his, especially white people. His identification with animals is further illustrated by the following quotation: "[G]reeting owls and frogs with the rat-like squeaks of my wheezing heart, I approach a farmhouse and talk quietly to the dogs, who always seem to know me" (278). This tells the truth that on one hand he has no better companion other than animals and on the other hand even animals share his weal and woe better than local people，especially the policemen who brutally take him away. At another time, he is even compared to a horse: "Like the horse, Baba had been growing white whiskers" (Castro, *Garden* 88). More often, though, he is like an old dog, loyal to his motherland China "with a distrust of everything," protective of his daughter, generating the kind of learned wisdom, "[f]or a while they [dogs] were very wise and serene, lying around with their hooded eyelids, licking at sores. But soon they were blurring around with a scent for adventure and sniffed out knowledge of the world with a distrust of everything" (88). Baba's relation with and attitude towards animals reflect his own ideas towards life and his situation in Australia. He is displaced in this continent, existing in eternal exile and laid off; thus has to sacrifice his only daughter's marriage and place his hope in the future generation. He is extremely deprived and depressed, but has to lick his deep sorrow and wounds alone, boosting his courage to live on in a nation full of aggression and injustice. It is no wonder that he gives more value and more empathy to the animals around him than to other people. Consequently, a mutual understanding is achieved in this companionship between humans and animals, and animals by their act or habit, speak for their human companions of the latter's unspeakable pain and unknown suffering. Thus, the alignment of humans and animals is seen to produce an effect which goes beyond a single human-centered effect in the depiction of Baba. This coordination of humans and non-humans is what Bennett names as "a heterogeneous assemblage."

The third image under discussion is Darcy. If Baba is associated with dogs, it is fair to argue that the image of the horse goes hand in hand with Darcy. When Darcy loses consciousness, he finds himself "[r]eincarnated as his horse" (69) and he identifies with the horse who he understands is "moody"; he contemplates that it "can't be fun being a horse as every time someone shows up you're bound to be ridden sweating up and down the mountain" (63). Here Darcy is picturing the horse image as being victimized. There are numerous places in which a horse is mentioned in this novel. For Darcy, horses represent an old way of country living that he has been clinging to, hating to depart from. "Everyone tells me horses are soon to be a thing of the past and I should

learn mechanicking instead because that's what's bringing people to the hills and the guest houses and the only fillies you see are sitting on four wheels. I don't know. Motor cars ruin the roads, spook the horses" (63-64). This clinging to tradition partly explains why Darcy cannot follow Swan's rhythm and pace in life, as well as in the literary world. His love and identification with horses can be seen from his first encounter with Swan. When he first meets Swan, he sees her riding a horse and coming down to him (72), and immediately he is attracted by the girl, as well as by the horse. Horse images in the book can also be detected elsewhere. When Baba teaches his students to draw, he asks them to draw a horse (86). For Baba and Swan, Darcy, as the horse the students are asked to draw, stands for hope before they change their fantasy into reality, but despair arises after one of the drawings turns out to be "a bucktoothed Chinaman eating a frog" (86). As a result, father and daughter are taught by such an experience that reality can contrast starkly with fantasy. No matter how hard they try to draw an ideal traditional Chinese picture, the harsh reality in Australia depresses and fails them. The horse image here suggests that no matter what year the story takes place, Australia and local people still cling to their old way of dealing with immigrants, misunderstanding and oppressing them as a consequence. So the capacity of agency of a horse helps to yield a more profound effect, moving away from that of human world. It is suggested that Australia in the 1930's still stick to its old, long standing White Australia Policy (Ma and Li, "Anti-Racism" 95), rendering Chinese women doubly oppressed.

The recurrent lyrebird image is a symbol of Jasper who becomes the fourth character aligned with animal. Swan undoubtedly finds lyrebirds alluring and elusive: "She saw a lyrebird strutting across the path, mimicking something. Its eyes were large. It was watching her. You watch me, she said, yet you flee from me" (Castro, *Garden* 130). The "strutting" pose of the lyrebird echoes that of Jasper, who preys on Swan, lures her, and then escapes from her. This echo probably explains why Jasper's plane is named "L'Oiseau Lyre. The Lyrebird" (284). This potential danger of being tempted and deserted by Jasper leads to many warnings: "Someone has placed little signs along the side of the road. *Lyrebirds Crossing* they read" (5-6). This point is further proved by the episode in which Norman "found a book on lyrebirds in the library. In the 1930s, a male lyrebird struck up a friendship with a solitary woman living here in the hills. This extraordinary mocking-bird with its lyric tail would tap on her window and whistle 'The Last Rose of Summer'" (317). Here Swan's solitude and her friendship with a male lyrebird (alluding to Jasper) are explicitly revealed. Interestingly, the allegorical meaning of lyrebird is: when a male bird is courting, he shows off his unique singing and masculinity and raising up his tail just as a player raises up his lyre. The lyrebird and Jasper share so many features in common and co-produce effects in the novel. Even after the death of both Jasper and Swan, the lyrebird still carries its power of agency: it exists on road signs to warn people crossing. The warning of danger passes from the previous generation between male and female, to Norman's generation when it changes into a warning about blessings and afflictions, white and non-white, local and alien. Whatever is not written about Jasper is given a voice in lyrebird, challenging the readers to join the reading and produce meaning together with the author. Note here: calling for readers to cooperate in exploring layers and layers of meaning and thus establishing a bond between readers and writer have always been Brian Castro's intention, as well shown in many of his characters such as Brennan and Costa in *Street to Street* and You Bok

Mun and the woman writer in *After China*.

2. The Human Body: Dead Bodies

In this part, the agency of the human body is discussed and represented in the novel by the dead bodies of both grown-ups and children. Both continue to narrate the stories of their carriers even after their death, bridging the past and present, the dead and living, the Indigenous and the white settlers, and the male and female characters in the novel.

Let us start with the children first. Penny, the only product of the marriage and the possible continuation of a healthy relationship between Swan and Darcy, "bearer of civilization," is not healthy from birth: "The baby was sickly. One illness after another. […] The child was always choking, crying" (Castro, *Garden* 126-127). In this sickly body lies the combination of man and woman, Australia and China. Unfortunately, she dies young. Darcy blames Swan for her death, accusing her of not being a responsible mother. Her body, as the result of suspicion and accusation, is autopsied, and the report shows that "the baby Penelope died from breathing difficulties. They believed it was a congenital malfunction of the lungs. It could have suffered this crisis at any time while sleeping" (140). This autopsy leads Swan to the sanatorium, where she lives an isolated life and receives brutal treatment, ending her life tragically.

The image of Penny, in the marriage life of Darcy and Swan, represents a possible union and hope between two genders as well as two cultures. As soon as she dies, the blame is on Swan only. As suggested above, the malfunction of Penny's lungs is "congenital," hinting the conflict of two cultures. The capability of agency of Penny is obvious and can even be seen after her death, rupturing the relationship, and causing dispute and conflict between Darcy and Swan. "We had an argument over the stone over the grave. She called it an obscenity, and I, a marker of my lost treasure. The blacks, I said, wrapped dead children in a possum rug and rolled them into a tube of bark and pushed the whole lot into a hollow tree. They didn't mourn dead children. It was a matter of survival" (Castro, *Garden* 142). Notice here that it is not only the dead body of Penny that still speaks, gaining power, keeping the plot moving, but also her spirit (268) which is capable of generating dispute and distaste between her mother and father, "Swan never knows where Penny is buried" (141). Her spirit, though invisible, now becomes an actant that can construct or deconstruct a relationship.

Besides the body of Penny, the dead bodies of Indigenous people are mentioned in the book. The dead bodies of children, "wrapped […] in a possum rug" and "pushed […] into a hollow tree," not only reveal the customs of Indigenous people, but also are a reminder of their ancestors "who occupied the Australian continent for over forty thousand years" and "were systematically dispossessed of their land" (Guest and Mattfeld 214). This massive death of children also brings the issue of "the image of the lost child" in which "Peter Pierce sees anxieties of belonging, a recurring motif in Australian art and literature" (214). Until 1967, Indigenous people were not counted in the national census, and thus were not considered as human beings in Australia. It can be suggested that the dead Indigenous people who have been invaded and displaced, are like the gypsies mentioned in *The Garden Book*, still speaking to us about history, theirs and ours, bringing charges against the

colonial origins of the nation and the notorious White Australia Policy.

Besides the dead bodies of children, there are also dead bodies of adults in the book. The book depicts such bodies three times—scattered bodies (Castro, *Garden* 4), dead bodies, corpses in Paris and Shanghai (179). The agency of such dead bodies can be seen from two aspects: first, the bodies bring together the air crash plot, with the opening scene tying up the loose threads left suspended at the very beginning of the book to the end of the book (216). Second, the dead bodies bring people together, despite their love and hate for each other during their lifetime. When Darcy saw the dead body of Jasper, their blood, alive and dead, Australian and American, Indigenous and the white, human and animal (worms), all mixed together. "He could only wipe his hand over them (maggots), sticky with blood, sticky with Fatso's blood, with Jasper's caked blood, his own, all commingled" (300). Amid the dead bodies, Darcy seems to forgive and forget everyone in his life at the critical moment. Yet, he singles Swan out and places blame not only on her but on her writing as well: "Her writing alerted their love; altered them. She had brought them all together... here. That was the connection. Somehow it seemed to be her fault" (300). The discord between wife and husband still lingers, despite the fusion of blood. We remember that Swan is to blame for the death of their daughter from above analysis, and now she is to blame for her writing poems, for their failed marriage—it seems that she is the one who should be responsible for their marriage, their love, and cultural union. Therefore, dead bodies as actant here, do not provide forgiveness and forgetting as they should, instead, they cultivate blame and hatred to the weaker side, the disadvantaged group.

3. The Human Artifacts: Paper and Airplane

This section discusses how the human artifacts are given the power of agency, namely, how paper and airplane function respectively. They are chosen and are discussed in detail because paper is considered to be a natural artifact made from trees, while an airplane is a technical artifact made by human beings. They form a pair, and at the same time they are seen as contrasting images in the book. Before he unfolds the story, Castro quotes from one of Franz Kafka's letters:

> Writing letters, however, means to denude oneself before the ghosts, something for which they greedily wait. Written kisses don't reach their destination, rather they are drunk on the way by the ghosts. It is on this ample nourishment that they multiply so enormously. Humanity senses this and fights against it and in order to eliminate as far as possible the ghostly element between people and to create a natural communication, the peace of souls, it has invented the railway, the motor car, the aeroplane. But it's no longer any good, these are evidently inventions being made at the moment of crashing. The opposing side is so much calmer and stronger; after the postal service it has invented the telegraph, the telephone, the radiograph. The ghosts won't starve, but we will perish. FRANZ KAFKA, Letter to Milena Jesenká

Here we can list the keywords in this quotation: letters, airplane, crashing. We can also make a contrast between "writing letters" and artifacts such as the telegraph, the telephone, the radiograph, and the airplane. We will move on with the agency and efficacy of the two in the following

paragraphs. For the sake of clarity and condensation, also for the rich connotation of the word itself, we will use "papers" instead of "writing letters" to illustrate our points.

In this book, even a piece of paper is endowed with the power of agency by Castro, who writes: "[Y]et the violence can be read here in the torn china *paper*" (*Garden* 142; emphasis added). Here paper as a thing speaks itself, of the failed marriage, of violence, of vanity and timidity, of love and hate, race and fusion. Not only that, but in the next paragraph, paper, unlike the airplane which is made "at the moment of crashing," lasts longer and is immune to bombs and crashes. "The paper fluttering around was mostly untouched. I noticed that phenomenon when I was in China. Paper always survived a bomb or a crash. I was squatting on the ground alongside contorted bodies, placing my fingers on arteries looking for a pulse and all this paper swirled about my boots and there was an almost empty diary" (183). The paper on which letters are written, diaries are printed, journals are kept, serves as the foundation of "[l]etters, postcards, ledgers, old paperbacks" (7) which play such a crucial role in the book, and which are the manifestations of the agential capacity of papers. As a thing itself, paper is given power characterized by its long-lasting durability and the ability to record. In addition, it can be collected, scattered, publicized, and even burnt. This point is partly illustrated by the writer through the character Norman:

> I'm a collector. A collector is driven by other things. Collecting is a form of knowledge, which allows a closer representation of the dead than history or narrative. It may be an obsession and a fickle one at that. For me though, it's an exact science because we are dealing with objects and not abstractions, and like most sciences, the collection of objects provides arbitrary closure, physical results—shapes, odours, touch—in order to claim authority. For example, a book entombs its time. This thin volume of poetry printed in Paris with a few specks of tobacco leaf pressed near the spine or the Gitanes cigarette packet with someone's initials scrawled over the blue figure of a gypsy woman, have more than smoking in common. History has missed a vital clue: the dead are gypsies. Still active, they flutter here and there, moths before the flames. With their painted fingernails they pull out cigarettes, underscore lines of poetry. They've left us these signs. Signs which make us what we are. You simply have to know how to collect them. You have to know the detours; that the whole idea of any story, like existence itself, is beside the point. (Castro, *Garden* 7)

Castro's concept of "objects" here refers to concrete items that can be collected and given authoritative meaning. He believes these kinds of objects can represent and tell about our past, our present, and even influence our future. Moreover, he believes that objects "have a subjective consciousness" that only "writing, typing, scratching onto paper; a textuality" can "free objects from our constant enslavement of them through categorization or identity thinking, so that they too, have a language, one that can initiate a dialogue of caring for their constriction and for their freedom" (Castro, "Detours" 4). As well, such belief strongly opposes the human tendency "to understate the degree to which people, animals, artifacts, technologies, and elemental forces share powers and operate in dissonant conjunction with each other" (Bennett 35). Instead, it sees a connectedness even co-operation between humans and non-humans.

Here Bill Brown's distinction between "objects" and "thing" is relevant and useful, emphasizing the agency of "thing" in this manner:

> … the very semantic reducibility of things to objects, coupled with the semantic irreducibility of things to objects, would seem to mark one way of recognizing how, although objects typically arrest a poet's attention, and although the object was what was asked to join the dance in philosophy, things may still lurk in the shadows of the ballroom and continue to lurk there after the subject and object have done their thing, long after the party is over. (3)

Both Brown and Castro write about the agential power of things, but in subtly different ways. While Castro writes about objects, tangible, and concrete, influencing human's future, having their own subjective consciousness, Brown emphasizes the capacity of things to exert influence, which happens when an object becomes a thing. Castro endows objects with affect and empathy when, as he put it, "you begin to talk to objects, not as things, but as friends" ("Detours" 4).

We will elaborate this point by using airplanes as another example in the novel. There are many incidents that endow planes with their narrative center: an airplane crashes (*Garden* 4, 263); an airplane is a vehicle for Jasper to send his love and charm to women (176); Jasper is so confident and skilled in the control of his plane (283); Swan has predicted the crash of the plane in her letter to Jasper (232) and Norman is searching for the two missing passengers from the crashed plane (4). The airplane acts as an actant, flying high, in control, highly skilled, a temptation to women, even to Madame Chiang. It is closely associated with the lyrebird, symbolizing male dominance. In addition, it is the plane that crashes. The air crash at the beginning of the book, of course, signifies its tragic nature. Both the characters and every kind of matter get involved in this life-matter entanglement.

Closing this section by referring to the Kafka quotation cited at the very beginning, we can tell the writer's attitude towards these two artifacts: his preference for papers over planes. If we compare and contrast these two artifacts, we can see that one is ancient, the other is modern; one is natural (from trees), the other is human-made; one is long-standing, the other is subject to crash at any moment, one of "evidently inventions being made at the moment of crashing," as Kafka put it. The feature they bear in common is that they both have and exercise power in their different involvements with human beings.

Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, Bennett points out that all matter, even the most seemingly inert metal, is associated with activeness, such as "quivering " or "evanescence"; it is metal that best reveals this quivering effervescence; it is metal, bursting with life, that gives rise to 'the prodigious idea of Nonorganic Life' " (Bennett 55). In light of this new perspective on thinking, this paper looks at the thing-power in Castro's *The Garden Book*, including the non-human beings such as animals, and non-living beings such as dead bodies, and non-active actants, such as paper and airplanes. Ontologically speaking, the encounter between such beings and humans, between life and matter co-creates a larger picture in which human and animal, Chinese and Australian, men and women, Indigenous and colonists all contribute to making our planet a more connected place to live, full of vitality and love. In this sense, what we need in a cosmopolitan world where racism

and conflict have become worse than ever is probably what Kant defined as the soul of ethics, "What should I (we) do?" (White n. p.). Here, Castro's valuable suggestions in this book are so encouraging, "I can hear your song; I can hear your language and even though immediate meaning may not be there, there is understanding and reception nevertheless" (Castro, "Detours" 6). What we need in such a global world is affect and empathy toward each other including non-humans, and that is what Castro's *The Garden Book* sets out to discover.

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