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أ. د. حسين محمود حسين حمودة
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تحية طيبة وبعد ،،،

تتقدم إليكم جامعة بدر بالقاهرة بالشكر على ما تبذلونه من جهد مادي ومعنوي لإصدار المجلة،
فتميزكم المشهود خير قدوة، ممتنين لعملكم الدؤوب وتفوقكم الباهر، ونتمنى لكم المزيد من
النجاحات المستقبلية.

تحريراً في يوم الأربعاء الموافق 2024/08/07.

رئيس مجلس الأمناء

د/ حسن القلا

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HOW NON-HUMAN THINGS MAKE US (LESS)HUMAN: POSTHUMANISM IN YOKO OGAWA'S *THE MEMORY POLICE* (1994)

Ola Elgohary

Arizona State University

Email: olalgohary@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: If you cannot identify objects around you, their significance, your bonds with them, your history together, are you still who you are? Yoko Ogawa conceptualizes an answer to this question in *The Memory Police* (1994), experimenting with a dystopian world where people lose their humanity, becoming less human with every non-human object and being in their lives getting erased from their memories, hence from (their) limited existence. The trauma induced by not being able to remember something that you do cannot even identify is the epitome of human vulnerability as tragically depicted by Ogawa, suggesting that, without memories and connections to surroundings, humans are oblivious, barely functional, barely alive — even barely existing. This paper aspires to (re)define where humanness ends and non-humanness begins — if there is at all any line to draw between those two ends of our existence and perception of the world and our physical possessions and the elements of nature around us, through the analysis of Yoko Ogawa's dismal dystopia *The Memory Police*, applying the theoretical framework proposed by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), tracing the vibrancy of non-human objects and beings and the role they play in the formation of human identity, value, and consciousness.

KEYWORDS: Vital materialism, vibrancy, memory, identity, humanness, Yoko Ogawa, *The Memory Police*.

INTRODUCTION

The Memory Police (1994) by Yoko Ogawa is an Orwellian, critically-acclaimed novel that “offers a unique first-person narrative where objects, ideas and words disappear both from the unnamed narrator's world and the prose we read” (Rauch). The conceptual, speculative novel is set on an unnamed dystopian island where the consciousness of objects are “disappeared” by the Memory Police whose “first duty ... [is] to enforce the disappearances” from residents' memory (Ogawa 14), as “useless memories [should] disappear quickly and easily [because] there's no point in holding onto them” (Ogawa 106). When something is “disappeared” it is removed as a concept from human recognition, and physically from the unnamed island through air or are sent away by the river, and people are required by the Memory Police to destroy any disappeared objects in their possession. Objects and/or concepts disappeared range from maps, hats, ribbons and roses to birds, boats, calendars, books, and all seasons but winter for the past ten years. Eventually, “no one can even recall what it was that disappeared” (Ogawa 4). The uncanniness of life that characters experience as they witness the disappearances and fail to recognize their significance and the memories attached to them leads them to lose parts of their identity, consciousness, and sense of reality. Death is more understandable and

bearable than the disappearance of objects as it does not strip humans from their humanness, unlike the disappearance of objects whose taken-for-granted presence is only realized in their absence; humanness is not only within the human body — it is extended to the objects and environment surrounding humans.

This paper aspires to (re)define where humanness ends and non-humanness begins — if there is at all any line to draw between those two ends of our existence and perception of the world and our physical possessions and the elements of nature around us. The novel is tackled through the theoretical framework of vital materialism as proposed by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), tracing the vibrancy of non-human objects and beings (namely, the environment) and their role the formation of human identity, memory, and overall consciousness.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: VIBRANT MATTER AND VITAL MATERIALISM IN JANE BENNETT'S *VIBRANT MATTER: A POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF THINGS* (2010)

In her book, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* Bennett discusses “the active role of nonhuman materials in public life”, giving voice to “thing-power” (2) — which she describes as “the curious ability of inanimate things [organic or not] to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (6). She refers to “thing power” also as “vibrant matter”: “an active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness” (3) that exists even things as simple and negligible as “[a] dead rat”, “some oak pollen”, “a stick of wood”, “a plastic glove”, or “a plastic bottle cap” (6). Most of these objects are usually perceived as minor details that often go unnoticed and peripheral, yet their existence has an undeniable, subconscious impact on humans within the same environment.

Bennett traces the vital materialistic approach back to philosophers like Baruch Spinoza and Theodor W. Adorno, showcasing the origins and progression of human thought concerning the agency of objects, stipulating that the posthumanist mindset has always existed. She starts her book by quoting Spinoza's words from his Short Treatise II: “It is never we who affirm or deny something of a thing; it is the thing itself that affirms or denies something of itself in us,” highlighting early mentions of what she calls “thing power”. “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its own being,” (2) Bennett quotes Spinoza, delineating the concept of “perseverance” or *conatus*. Spinoza's concept of *conatus* is that “each individual strives to preserve its being or maintain what might be called homeostasis,” which is “the very essence of each thing,” Kluz explains. Bennett recognizes that, in his concept of *conatus*, Spinoza has made a clear distinction between humans and things, yet he “continually stresses this continuity between human and other beings,” for “not only do human beings not form a separate imperium unto themselves; they do not even command the imperium, nature, of which they are a part” (Levene 8). Thus, the acknowledgement of vibrant matter and agency of inanimate objects has been

recorded in philosophy since the seventeenth century — the rise of the European Industrial Revolution, which incited philosophers to wonder about the essence of humanity within a world of progressive mechanization and automation, and to pay attention and tribute to the impact of the non-human on the human and vice versa, and the defining factors of each.

Accepting the fact that non-human objects and our surrounding environment have a substantial effect on humans falls along the lines of “vital materialism,” which Bennett defines as one “way to promote human health and happiness: to raise the status of the materiality of which we are composed. Each human is a heterogeneous compound of wonderfully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter. If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated” (12-13). Bennett further expounds on vital materialism by referring to Theodor W. Adorno, the German philosopher’s theory that “humans can experience the outside only indirectly, only through vague, aporetic, or unstable images and impressions,” as “concepts on their part are moments of the reality that requires their formation” (17). Bennett notes that a “thing” is “always already humanized; its object status arises at the very instant something comes into our awareness” (18). Hence, a human does not exist in abstraction, and is always part of the environment surrounding them that is throbbing with life even if it is nonliving, i.e. humans are part of what Bennett calls an “assemblage” (Bennett 23).

Bennett defines “assemblages” as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts” (Bennett 23). Assemblages are: living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within. They are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group. Assemblages have a “finite lifespan” and eventually collapse, being destroyed from within. For example: an electrical power grid which eventually blacks out (Bennett 23-24). Henceforth, Bennett’s theoretical framework is mainly about addressing humans as part of their environment, and the mutual impact humans and their surroundings have on one another.

This approach acknowledges the fact that humanness is not only contained in the human body and mind – it is rather extended to the human’s surroundings and environment. Humans are material beings just like their nonliving surroundings, and they form physical, mental, and emotional bonds and get attached to their environment and possessions which construct a conspicuous part of the human experience. In her novel *The Memory Police*, Yoko Ogawa experiments with the effect of removing all memories that attach humans to their surrounding objects and environment. As the humans lose their memories of their objects, their world becomes less material, less human, and more abstract, which throws them into a state of existential dread and dissociation, eventually losing the essence of what makes them human: their physicality and their memories of their physical environments.

LITERARY ANALYSIS OF VIBRANT MATTER AND VITAL MATERIALISM IN YOKO OGAWA'S *THE MEMORY POLICE* (1994)

Ogawa is a critically-acclaimed, award-winning Japanese writer and novelist who received every major writing award in Japan. She has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *A Public Space*, and *Zoetrope*. Ogawa is most famous for her novels: *The Housekeeper and the Professor*, *The Diving Pool*, and *The Memory Police* — a work shortlisted for the International Booker Prize in 2020 (“Yoko Ogawa”). *The Memory Police* is highly symbolic and rife with allusions, therefore can be read on many levels. The focus of this analysis is on the conatus of memories, setting, and the written word, primarily through examining the allusion to Plato's Cave, the setting of the unnamed Island as an assemblage in Bennett's terms, and the art of writing as an act of resistance, persistence.

Plato's Cave: Memory and Reality

R, the beloved editor of the unnamed narrator and one of the rare individuals unaffected by the memory losses enforced by the Memory Police, says the room that was built under the narrator's office as a hideout for him from the Memory Police is “like a cave floating in the sky” (77). This suggests a direct allusion to Plato's Cave Allegory, where what the average person sees is only a copy of a copy of the true, transcendent form of the object. “This place of ignorance is not only a dark cave; it is a prison, a deprivation chamber” (DeNicola); in the novel, however, this cave analogy is reversed. In *The Memory Police*, people's memories hold the truth as the world around them is being turned into Plato's Cave. Disappeared objects/concepts become meaningless illusions of true forms. Such objects lose their thing-power as they are not identified by the vast majority of the islanders anymore. The true forms of disappeared objects/ concepts only abstractly exist in the minds of people whose memories cannot be erased. Such objects retain their vibrancy only for the rare islanders with memories.

Object disappearances are not done without harm to the characters who forget them. The narrator reflects on how “disturbing” it can be to see objects that were disappeared: it feels like “tossing something hard and thorny into a peaceful pond” (147). Another character, the old man, ponders on the loss of ferries, saying, “as things got thinner, more full of holes, our hearts got thinner too, diluted somehow” (54). Losing memories “dilutes” the awareness and experience of reality, causing irreversible damage. Even reintroducing an object that has disappeared to islanders

with erased memories, like a music box that R gifts to the old man, the music seems like a magic “trick” to the old man and the protagonist, who adds, “as I listened, transfixed, I felt the same slow, spinning sensation that I felt every time something disappeared” (144). Therefore, the vibrancy of an object/concept does not only identify it, but also reflects on humans in touch with such an object/concept. It empowers those who remember them and feel their vibrancy, confirming Spinoza’s concept of perseverance or conatus that each object has to keep existing. Even the inverted Plato’s Cave society established on the Island does not completely manage to eradicate the thing-power of disappeared objects/concepts as they are already deeply embedded into the people’s memories, whether they remember them or recognize that there is a missing memory of the object; even if they are unable to identify it, they can feel its vibrancy.

Remembrance on its own is a form of power and resistance. While the reason why the police are after people’s memories, this is speculative fiction after all and the point is to be open for interpretation. Regardless of the reason, a person’s memory of their bond with their inanimate and nonhuman surroundings is what defines them. Reality and memory overlap, exchanging physical and abstract forms of existence, yet the truth finds a way to exist even when stripped of its original form, and survives as a memory that cannot be erased, confirming Spinoza’s concept of conatus.

The Island as an Assemblage

Bennett’s definition of an assemblage applies to the setting of the novel. Bennett explains that “The elements of the assemblage work together”, and these elements “include humans and their (social, legal, linguistic) constructions” as well as “some very active and powerful nonhumans: electrons, trees, wind, fire, electromagnetic fields” with the “energies and factions that fly out from [all the elements] and disturb [the assemblage] from within” (Bennett 24). Ogawa describes the island as a place “run by men who are determined to see things disappear [...] they force it to disappear with their own hands” (Ogawa 25). The setting, i.e. the unnamed Island, is an assemblage of the objects (organic and not), concepts, humans, and the interrelation and overlap between the conatus/consciousness of objects, concepts, and humans (including the Memory Police) that the Memory Police are trying to break, or in Bennett’s terms, “disrupt” from within. The assemblage “not only has a distinctive history of formation but a finite life span” (Bennett 24), which the Memory Police is trying to bring to an end for an undeclared reason.

Every part of the assemblage of the Island is primarily dependent on humans’ awareness of the components of their environment. According to Adorno, we do not experience the world directly, but through the medium of our senses (Bennett 17). To deprive people from their senses and their memories is to deprive them of their reality, to dehumanize their surroundings, and in return obliterate humanness of the islanders. “Each object that is disappeared takes layers of personal and shared knowledge with it” (Thien), eradicating the assemblage from within, bit by bit,

starting with the material down to the essential abstract essence of the object that exists within the awareness of humans. The “object status [of an object] arises at the very instant something comes into our awareness” (Bennet 18), and disappears once it is out of human awareness. Therefore, as the Memory Police takes down parts of this assemblage, other parts fall down in a domino-effect as humans fail to remember/identify them. When birds disappeared, the narrator’s father ran out of his life purpose and definition as an ornithologist. When the ferries disappeared, the old man, the old ferryman who lived on his boat, became homeless and jobless, and not even sure what his home was like. The narrator describes how the “hunt for memories became a daily activity in the midst of the snowstorm” (Ogawa 97) in which the hunter has no clear vision of what they are searching for. Parts of the assemblage are possessions, and others are human bodies — all of which are destined to an eventual abstraction and disappearance as they lose their physical status, the acknowledgement of the islanders, and in consequence, their thing-power is weakened and their persistence into existence is diminished.

To exemplify, one of the iconic objects in the assemblage of the Island in the novel is perfume. A perfume bottle has a specific value to humans, but once we do not understand the idea behind it like what the narrator goes through, it is useless and eventually rots and loses purpose, and any significance it might have had to people who remember it, like for R. R can still smell the perfume of the roses that were disappeared — something that the narrator and the old man are unable to smell or make sense of as they do not remember the roses, and that is tough for them, especially that they know they are supposed to make sense of these objects that they previously enjoyed. The decontextualization of material objects is torture; “For the old man and the novelist, despite their great longing, the objects elicit no response: they do not recognize them and cannot guess their use. The decay in their hearts appears irreversible”, notes Madeleine Thien in her novel review in *The Guardian*. The narrator remembers the disappearance of roses, “most beautiful disappearance ever” (Ogawa 48) but not the roses themselves. This way, the roses which were humanized into perfume that gave them an extra value and a longevity they did not achieve as short-lived creatures, but not anymore, as they slip out of the majority’s consciousness and their “thing-power”/“vibrancy” is reduced. The assemblage of the island “is increasingly full of gaping holes” (Thien) with the vital humanized materiality of one thing is taking down the vitality of the other that still exists without its essence.

The physical existence of humans is threatened and its consequential disappearance tightly knitted to the disappearance of humans’ memories. As part of the assemblage, human bodies carry memories that would still survive the disappearance of objects, which the Memory Police finds as a source of power that humans need to be stripped of. A Memory Police officer tells the narrator that “if [her] big toe becomes infected with gangrene, [she] cut[s] it off as soon as [she] can. If [she] do[es] nothing, [she] end[s] up losing the whole leg” (Ogawa 106), foreshadowing the disappearance of legs — the first body part that is disappeared by

the Memory Police. The Memory Police start targeting human limbs as a way to find who can still use their legs properly instead of just dragging them around, i.e. those who can *remember* their limbs, and then they would be identified as risky individuals whose memories are unaffected by the Memory Police, and they eventually get caught. The narrator notes that these bodily disappearances are “in fact, easier and more peaceful than the earlier ones, as no one had to gather in the square to burn the objects or send them floating down the river” (256). R tries to comfort her, but she warns him that “every last bit of me will disappear” (257). This reflects how human ties to their physical environment (natural or constructed) is as vital as it is to their own bodies. A human is an assemblage within an assemblage of their environment, and can be brought down, i.e. “disrupted” most effectively from within.

Writing: Persistence and Remembrance

The act and art of writing is a motif in *The Memory Police*; it is an act of persistence, resistance, and remembrance that the Memory Police eventually ban. The narrator (who is a novelist) and R (her editor) are working on the narrator’s manuscript: a story-within-a-story about a typist who is lured by her sadistic typing teacher into a clocktower where she is trapped and “loses her voice” (Ogawa 28) as it gets “sealed off now that it no longer has a purpose (Ogawa 130). The only thing she (the typist) can use to communicate is a broken typewriter, until she disappears in the clockwork, and then her teacher takes in another woman and the cycle of disappearances continues. Unlike the character of the typist, the narrator’s actual voice disappears the last, but losing her ability to write is the actual loss of her voice. The manuscript is the narrator’s and R’s way to make sense of the world, to resist losing their sanity and contact with reality. Reality is not the same for R and the narrator anymore as R remembers everything and the narrator nothing; the manuscript is the only common ground and constant for both of them. While the story is not physical or part of the environment, the manuscript and the words retain physical qualities that somehow ground the characters. The manuscript is a symbol of a thought process — of how getting out of the cave is like copying reality (hers, her mother’s) without the Memory Police being able to censor it. The story of the typist serves as a palindrome of the narrator’s disappearing self and world, a token of evidence of her existence and the struggles she has gone through before she herself disappeared, a proof she ever existed.

Vocabulary and language are the vessels of human voice and conatus — the peak technology humanity has ever achieved. Throughout the novel, “story’s events constantly change its parameters of vocabulary and challenge our understanding of the prose”, Joseph Rauch mentions in his review, probably because of “the memory loss narrative element”. The unique dynamic employed by Ogawa between the vocabulary in her prose and the loss thereof in the world of the novel adds to the experience of reading the novel, integrating the reader into the island losing language, further engaging with the characters’ struggles. Overcoming the oblivion of time through the passage of history in written format is what gives humans “voice”.

Therefore, the Memory Police eventually target words, which is the narrator's greatest fear (Ogawa 26) that she writes about in her manuscript, metaphorizing it in the loss of her typist's recognition of words. In the narrator's manuscript, the typist explains that "When the voice that links the body to the soul vanishes, there is no way to put into words one's feelings or will. I am reduced to pieces in no time" (Ogawa 166), which reflects the protagonist as well. For the typist, words sound like "the random squeaking of an out-of-tune instrument" (Ogawa 167), which mirrors the old man and the protagonist losing the word for music box: a "beautiful word" that is like "the name of a rare animal or flower" (Ogawa 145). When the narrator discovers her mother's hidden abstract statues that were themselves containers objects that R identifies, but the narrator and the old man cannot. Art is not merely a banished Platonic concept of a copy of a copy of a form — art *is* the form itself, also banished from the Island.

Towards the end of the plot, novels disappear, and shortly after, human bodies. The correlation between the disappearance of stories and humans highlights the inseparability of the human voice and the collective legacy of tales and ballads from being human. In a desperate attempt to keep the narrator alive, R offers to hide the narrator's books in the secret room instead of having them burned by the memory police. He begs the narrator to continue writing her manuscript, but given the fact words are devoid of meaning, she believes that keeping "the manuscripts and the books" is like keeping "Boxes with nothing inside. You can peer into them, listen carefully, sniff the contents, but they signify nothing," — alluding to lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: "It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing" (*Macbeth* 5.5.26-28). The narrator feels that her "soul seems to be breaking down" (176) as she is getting deprived of the (written) word — her memories, her fears, her art, her career. All the surrendered books on the Island are burned in large, public fires in a scene reminiscent of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. She "could hear the sound of [her] memory burning that night" (195). She remembers the German poet Heinrich Heine's quote: "Men who start by burning books, end by burning other men," (but she already forgets its source) coming to the realization that the next thing to disappear is definitely humans (184). These are powerful allusions to some of the greatest books that constitute the pillars of the evolution of collective human understanding of the self and the universal struggles of humanity. The narrator's mind seems to be racing through all the wisdom recorded in literature as long as she can remember words, which soon will fade away and get eaten by fire. The panic, the realization that death of language and literature is the death of mankind and humanity is a compelling statement by Ogawa on the vibrancy of words and language on the consciousness and humanness of mankind.

Forgetting, as portrayed by Ogawa, mimics what a person can go through in a state of depression and/or dementia. A writer like the narrator might get swallowed by a writer's block and feel decapitated as they are stripped of how they used to make sense of the world. In a way, this is a material but also a spiritual need that the Memory Police is targeting by disappearing books and novels. Most of the "citizens

of the island were by now quite accustomed to these losses” (65), but the narrator is not. She imagines the escape from the island and wonders if “there’s a place out there where people whose hearts aren’t empty can go on living” (117). R tells the narrator that if “[she] can’t write with [her] head, he wants her to “write with her hand” (Ogawa 43), further asserting that humans are indeed as physical as they are mental. The protagonist says, “nothing was likely to interest my soul in its weakened state” (243). R says that the protagonist’s “heart is doing everything it can to preserve its existence” (Ogawa 158). The conatus of her mind, heart, and body eventually crumbles under the weight of the absence of words and human voice — of the collapsing assemblage of the Island at the hands of the Memory Police. R and the manuscript survive this collapse and the narrator’s memory and voice live through R’s memory and the words she wrote, commemorating her life and struggles. Indirectly, eventually the narrator perseveres through the futile attempts of the Memory Police to erase her — even if she physically does not exist anymore. As long as R remembers her and keeps her manuscript, she remains, even if she is part of an assemblage that has fallen apart.

CONCLUSION

Humans are not just souls floating in space and thus cannot exist in abstraction. When the protagonist voices her fears: “What if everything on the island disappears?” R replies, “Even if the whole island disappears, this room will still be here” (232), asserting that the very physical space of the room is what would provide safety and stability for their physical bodies in a world disappearing into nothingness — something humans cannot really fathom.

By the end of the novel, humans are not able to identify their own limbs, becoming a shell of their previous selves, and definitely less-human due to the absence of the epigenetic, non-human, material environment. The narrator thinks that the old man is lucky to have died before the disappearance of body parts. Even death is easier for humans to understand than “nothingness”, especially for believers who think of death as the bridge between this material world to another one where there is heaven and hell, each with very vivid descriptions and visualizable manifestations.

The trauma induced by the inability to remember something that you do cannot even identify is the epitome of human vulnerability as tragically depicted by Yoko Ogawa, suggesting that, without memories, language, and connections to surroundings, humans are oblivious, barely functional, barely alive — even barely existing. This argument is asserted by Jane Bennett’s theory of vibrant matter and the deconstructive modeling of the vital materialistic relations between humans and their surroundings as “assemblages” as portrayed in Ogawa’s *The Memory Police*.

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