

CHAPTER 11

Objects and Memorabilia in Deborah Lutz's *The Brontë Cabinet*:

Three Lives in Nine Objects (2015)¹

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This chapter will explore Deborah Lutz's *The Brontë Cabinet: Three Lives in Nine Objects* (2015) in the light of a renewed interest in Victorian material culture, and through an analysis of the material side of the trace of the Victorian past, objects and things in contemporary culture. The growing interest in objects and sensory experience in Victorian scholarship provides the broader context for a neo-Victorian burgeoning fascination with objects, bodies and the sense of touch. In this biography of the Brontë sisters, Lutz considers the objects that the sisters possessed, and follows their lives through those objects and things present in their daily activities, some of them belonging to their childhood (the miniature, for instance). By paying a heightened attention to things, Lutz illuminates not only the Brontë sisters' lives, but also provides a nuanced reading into Victorian material culture. These Victorian traces prove the affective power invested upon objects and texts which clearly mediate between an absent Victorian past and a contemporary present; therefore, Lutz's text (like her *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture*, also published in 2015) demonstrates the relevance of affective encounters with the past through collecting, and the complex relationship between subject and object.

The Brontë Cabinet: Three Lives in Nine Objects might look as if it were another addition to the current emphasis on exploring and unearthing the lesser-known aspects of Victorian authors in biographies and also in fiction. One such example is Lilian Nayder's *The Other Dickens: A Life of Catherine Hogarth* (2010), which rehabilitates the figure of Charles Dickens' wife, Catherine Hogarth, as contrasted to the image created by the author of an

uninteresting woman who was just a burden to his own personal and professional ambitions (Nayder 2010, “Introduction”). Nayder debunks this story to portray Catherine Dickens as an intelligent person, an artist, an excellent household manager and a loving wife and mother. Such overturning of the reputation that Dickens’ wife has suffered among critics, since Dickens wrote a letter publicly denouncing the mental state of his wife, has become more visible in the last few years as proved by an exhibition which took place at Charles Dickens Museum, “The Other Dickens: Discovering Catherine Dickens” (May 3 through November 20, 2016), guest curated by Lilian Nayder and based on her biography of Catherine Dickens. In turn, Kathryn Hughes’ *Victorians Undone* participates in the ‘material turn’ in historical and literary scholarship, paying special attention to things and objects, and putting flesh on to disembodied figures of the past (2017, xiv).

A similar scenario has taken place as regards the Brontë sisters, Charlotte, Emily and Anne. Their lives have always fascinated the general public and critics alike, since Elizabeth Gaskell’s biography of Charlotte Brontë, published in 1857. Since then, a wide array of biographies have pierced into their lives, and have analysed their production in close relation to the factual information left behind, as the sisters, and Branwell (their ill-fated brother), have always inspired so much admiration and fascination. Among the many biographies published in the twenty-first century are Lucasta Miller’s *The Brontë Myth* (2000), Claire Harman’s *Charlotte Brontë: A Fiery Heart* (2015), and, more recently, Claire O’Callaghan’s *Emily Brontë Reappraised: A View from the Twenty-First Century* (2018) and Samantha Ellis’ *Take Courage: Anne Brontë and the Art of Life* (2017)—all of them stand out for various reasons. For example, O’Callaghan’s biography impinges on the legacy of Emily, the most reclusive of the sisters, and the idolatry that her figure inspires because “the void in detail about Emily *from* Emily makes her riper for myth-making than any other Brontë” (5; emphasis in original). If Emily and Charlotte still captivate us, Anne Brontë usually leaves us

indifferent, attracting the attention of neither critics nor the public, always considered, as Samantha Ellis puts it, “[t]he less talented Brontë, the one in her sisters’ shadow, the *other* Brontë” (Ellis 2017, 1; emphasis in original).

Anticipating the Brontë200 commemoration, a programme organised by the Brontë society celebrating the bicentenary of the births of four of the Brontës, Lutz published her take on the biography of the three sisters through the objects they used and cherished daily, with the aim of infusing life into the Brontës, to make them alive again: “So alive are [her] novels that I wish I could resurrect the Brontës themselves, their daily living and breathing, their material presence” (2015a, xx). Before her, Paula Byrne had addressed a similar project in focusing on eighteen objects that populate Jane Austen’s life and work in *The Real Jane Austen: A Life in Small Things*, a biography which has contributed to discovering new angles in Austen, one of the most elusive of the British writers. In her epilogue, Byrne reaches the conclusion that it is fitting that the “only irrefutably authentic image of the real Jane Austen is Cassandra’s sketch of her back” (Byrne 2013, 328), where her face is unknown to the viewer, thus evoking her ongoing elusiveness. Lutz offers an altogether different approach to the Brontës since she aims at re-constructing their lives through an acute analysis of daily objects and artefacts, many of which feature prominently in the Brontës’ novels, that are visible traces from their past, as well as from the age in which they lived.

The Brontë Cabinet contains nine chapters, each preceded by a photograph of an object that centres on everyday objects in the Brontës’ lives. Arguably, Lutz falls prey to the “desire to fetishize the loved author’s possessions” (Wynne 2017, 4), but she also sees the potential of the object to resurrect past lives, and to connect past and present, thus producing a text that “successfully straddles academic writing and popular biography” (4). In fact, its ambiguous status, in between artefact, biography, and literature, provides one of the defining traits of this piece of writing which has fascinated both critics and readers. In what follows I

will examine Lutz's text following a combined approach of hermeneutics, new materialist studies and phenomenology, to unlock and analyse the affective encounter of the present with the Victorian past through the study of objects, and in relation to the individual.²

The objects deployed and evoked in Lutz's text lend to a material consideration of the past, being as they are remnants and traces of the private lives of the Brontës, on the one hand, and textual relics of the Victorian period, on the other, which allows for a nuanced, affective, rendering of the age in which the objects were used. The notion of the trace in historical interplay, mainly theorised by Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of history, has complicated our understanding of the past in textual representation, and especially, when it is concerned with feminist issues. The materiality of the trace and its duration are two issues at stake here. Ricoeur described the trace in a threefold manner: the cerebral or cortical, the psychical or affective trace and written trace. The focus of my attention will be placed upon both the affective (the relationship between the impression of traces and the affections) and written traces, in relation to phenomenology, that is to say, the representation of the past (Ricoeur 2004, 419). The affect-impression (the affective trace) relates to how memory and perceptions produce an "imprint in the soul' *as* in a block of wax" (14–15; emphasis in original). The questions that the philosopher puts forward in his work are pertinent to the materiality of the trace: "on the one hand, how is [the affect-impression] preserved, how does it persist, whether or not it is recalled? On the other, what meaningful relation does it maintain in relation to the marking event?" (2004, 14). In Ricoeur the trace becomes relevant because of its duration (Ricoeur 1985, 120); in other words, it has a material connection with the past and yet its presence is inscribed in the present, therefore the past is physically present through its material traces, and the trace implies the future in its survival, in its endurance. The trace exists across time and space, and "paradoxically becomes a vehicle for asserting a coeval view of time" (Zimmerman 2008, 149). Victoria Browne has recently utilised the

notion of the trace as a call for feminism since, in her view, the trace bypasses the removal of the historical referent in postmodern historiography, and in so doing it privileges “the ontological primacy of the traces of past events” (2014, 50). Then, Browne proposes a dynamic model of historiography based upon the idea that “historical time is multilinear and multidirectional”; in other words, “historical time should be understood as *polytemporal*” (2; emphasis in original), considering the nature of the trace: “polytemporal coexistence or complex coevalness [or] sharing the same time does not require an ironing out of temporal differences, or a purging of political contest through separation into phases or a temporal hierarchy ... the image conjured here is not of stages of waves, but rather of a shifting entanglement of trajectories and temporalities of feminism as multilinear rather than unilinear” (45–46). In being multilinear, dynamic and polytemporal, the trace becomes the perfect vehicle for a feminist view of historical processes, as mentioned above, as well as for the study of the material remnants of the past, tangible relics in the present of an absent past, which fuel and re-orient our imagination towards the future. This is the case with Lutz’s *The Brontë Cabinet*, where the Brontë’s objects manifest a “complex coevalness,” following Browne, while signalling the materiality and tangibility of the past in the present through the evocation of the senses and feelings. As regards materiality, in *Time and Memory* (volume 3) Ricoeur called our attention to the traces as works that survived their authors and remain, proposing that they possessed a “thing-like character” (1985, 120). Arguably, the past is rendered visible through the material aspect of the trace. Although Material Culture Studies pays attention to objects as artefacts and “the social and symbolic practices...as well as the forms of communication directed at them” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011, 9), the materiality of the trace clearly intersects with the notion of the thing, expounded by thing theory, whose main representative is Bill Brown.

Brown first outlined his theory in a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* (“Things” 2001),

later republished in *Things*, edited by Brown (2004), and then developed in *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003). In his ground-breaking article “Things” (2001), he provides an innovative way of understanding the inanimate object and the human in relation to it. He interweaves psychology and phenomenology, drawing on Martin Heidegger’s “The Thing” and Jean Baudrillard’s theories about consumerism, to consider how “we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us” (2001, 4). This way, an object turns into a thing when it is granted another dimension apart from its utilitarian aspect. Things are what outdo their mere use as objects. The thing-like aspect of objects is faced when “their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject as thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (4). Therefore, what is at stake here is the way in which we use objects to make meaning and to communicate ideas in a manner that exceeds commodity relations. Brown is especially concerned with nineteenth-century American literature, and in particular with novels of the 1890s (2003, 18), where he applies his notion of the thing as a mediator between subject and object. In addition, thing theory “concerns the slippage between *having* (possessing a particular object) and *being* (the identification of one’s self with that object) ... the indeterminate ontology where things seem slightly human and humans seem slightly thing-like” (2003, 13; emphasis in original). Therefore, Brown’s conceptualisation of the thing results in a “subjectification” of objects, and in turn, an “objectification” of subjects, that is to say, a mutuality in which relational relationships between subjects and things come to the fore. This networked relation has been reconceptualised by Brown himself and other critics who have fed upon Michel Serres’ terms “quasi-object” and “quasi-subject” expounded in *The Parasite* (1980). Drawing on the example of a ball game, in which the ball

is constantly in movement and is circulated among the players, he develops his concept of “quasi-object,” which is “not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject ... this quasi-object, when being passed, makes the collective, if it stops, it makes the individual” (2007, 225). Therefore, the quasi-object is the producer of intersubjectivity, and relation. This notion of the quasi-object has important bearings upon the way the Victorians perceived the relationship between subject and object, since the Victorian fascination with the body’s materiality, as well as the blurring of boundaries between subject and object, have become the subject of critical interest in the last twenty years, also to be found in neo-Victorianism, as I have noted elsewhere.³ Katharina Boehm’s edited collection *Bodies and Things in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture*, which precisely focuses on the permeable boundaries between subjects and objects in the nineteenth century (Boehm 2012, 6–7), resonates with many of the issues that I examine in this chapter, and shows deeper implications of the dichotomy between subject-object in today’s disembodied world.

There seems to be a general agreement upon the notion that “humans think through material culture” (Hodder 2012, 35). Indeed, Lutz mobilises “material culture” in her introduction to the text and acknowledges the relevance of the field in literary studies in the last twenty years. In her words, “borrowing from archaeology and anthropology, the field of ‘material culture’ (also called ‘thing theory’) in literary studies flourishes: taking an object depicted in fiction and using it to explore the story and the culture in which the tale is embedded” (Lutz 2015a, xxii–xxiii). Interestingly, analysing objects and perception in literature has faced resistance in some critical quarters when critics argue that the literary representation cannot be equated with the “real thing.” To address this objection, one can resort to Ricoeur’s hermeneutics or “theory of reading,” one of his main tenets, which is

based upon the notion that any written text has meanings because it shows and mirrors life, which in turn gains relevance through its representation in written works: “whatever discipline we are in, be it history, psychoanalysis, literary criticism or whatever, that discipline is constructed through texts, and those texts each in different ways conceal their true meaning that hermeneutics reveals—the meaning of life. By extension, life itself can be ‘read’, or interpreted, and that interpretation itself reveals life to be a narrative” (Simms 2003, 2).

Interestingly, new theories of materiality have recently emerged, mentioned by Lutz (2015a, 258), which seem to balance out the emphasis on flows, global circulation, and disembodiment in contemporary culture, revealing a tension as I will mention later. Object-relations ontology (known as OOO) and metaphysics of objects, developed from Martin Heidegger’s extension of the idea of the “thing-in-itself” (as expounded by Immanuel Kant), predicate upon the independent life of objects and its relationship with other objects. The human presence is merely regarded as an in-between figure and a type of translator. In an article applying object-relations ontology to the materiality of Lord Byron’s poetry, specifically *Don Juan* (1819–1824), Brian Rejack refers to the ways in which the objects enter into relation, through a mechanism of translation, whereby the human being is never fully present:

We see the objects not for what they are but for how they affect and allude to one another. Mediation, by definition an attempt to overcome separation, only ever alludes to those separated things. Mediation is predicated on absence, but that does not mean mediation accomplishes nothing. Byron clearly recognizes the potential for paper, ink, and humans to interact with and affect other existing objects. But his approach to mediation in *Don Juan* continually recognizes the reality of contingency and the necessary agency of non-human objects. (2016, n.p.)

In Lutz’s text the objects have meanings in themselves, but they also affect and allude to one another in the wholeness of the text/cabinet, and to other authors, texts and contexts. For example, the chapter entitled “Out Walking” presents Charlotte’s and Emily’s acts of walking

as “a recognized form of defiance” (Lutz 2015a, 79), and traces the power of physical mementos and keepsakes, like Branwell’s walking stick, to evoke the past. The material object that remains is relevant in itself, but it enters into relation with other objects or with other non-human elements (other sticks, the night wind, trekking the moors). Also, the object relates to and with the collection as a whole, which in a way offers a memory walk to the Brontë’s world. The collection, thus defined as “a memory walk,” contains “the memory of past walks along the same ground, of thoughts, events, and life epochs” (Lutz 2015a, 73), thus signalling the places where the Brontës lived, which defines the collection, Lutz’s cabinet of collectibles, as multilayered, multidirectional and polytemporal.

Although Lutz explicitly rejects the notion that the non-human world possesses a life of its own regardless of human intervention and perception, there is a tendency in new materiality to suggest that we need to make objects talk to us.⁴ Andrew Cole has addressed this notion when perceiving that objects are “mute” as they become instrumentalised. In his view, “we need to relate to them differently so that they will tell stories about themselves. Make them ‘utter a word.’ ‘*Make them talk.*’...let’s allow the objects to be heard” (2013, 111; emphasis in original). He further mentions Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* (2010) where she proposes that things make “calls” when we give a voice to the thing’s power: in her book she tries “to give a voice to a thing-power” (2010, 2), a productive force.

All in all, and despite the current importance conceded to the ‘thing-in-itself’, Lutz argues that she still holds onto the belief that the study of the object should be contextualised in the historical period, and that she aims to explore what the object can reveal from its owner and how it results from its relationship with the human factor. In other words, the object gains its relevance in context and in relation to the human, that is to say, to “place each object in its cultural setting and in the moments of the everyday lives of the Brontës” (2015a, xxiv). In so doing, this work blurs the boundaries between private and public, the individual and the

collective, the factual and the literary. Following one reviewer of Lutz's *The Brontë Cabinet*, "this book is an exceptionally intimate study of the three sisters, through it we look into the most private corners of the parsonage" (Trethewey 2015), while simultaneously offering fresh insights into the materiality of the Victorian world. Importantly, Lutz adds new associations to the Brontës' juvenilia, poetry and fiction, when invoking an object in each chapter, thus covering three areas of study: Victorian household practices and objects, the Brontës' everyday reality, and their imaginative fictive worlds. This way, Lutz's book resembles the multi-layered structure of a Victorian cabinet with boxes, drawers, and doors opening its secret contents up to us, as contemporary readers.

Indeed, Lutz's book, whose title plays with the Victorian craze for collecting and cabinets, as an object, represents and becomes an actual cabinet itself, showing objects which were meaningful both for the Brontë sisters and for Victorian culture as a whole, fascinated as they were with cabinets and collections. Collections are concerned with time: Baudrillard has noted in this respect that "*the setting up of a collection itself displaces real time*." Doubtless this is the fundamental project of all collecting—to translate real time into the dimensions of a system" (16; emphasis in original). In turn, Mieke Bal asserts that "collecting can be attractive as a gesture of endless deferral of death" (1994, 112). However, not only does a collection arrest time, and defy death, but also it manifests the human desire to tell a story in an altogether different form: collecting "is an essential human feature that originates in the need to tell stories, but for which there are neither words nor other conventional narrative modes. Hence, collecting is a story" (103). Following this line of thought, Lutz's book is both a cabinet, a collection (of items), and an object. As a collection, it tells a story, the story of the Brontë sisters, in juxtaposition with their fiction, as well as the story of the Victorian material world. In so doing, this cabinet, this collection, not only arrests time and death, but it shows polytemporality as a distinctive feature. Also, by adding the word

“cabinet” to the title, *The Brontë Cabinet*, Lutz connects the collection of items to the birth of the museum, namely, the cabinet of curiosities. Julie Marcus mentions two main strands regarding the origins of the museum: one camp considers the modern museum as totally different from the cabinet of curiosities which was in vogue from the seventeenth century onwards. However, there is another strand which favours “the continuities between those older cabinets of curiosities and their wondrous collections, and the great collections and collection houses of the nineteenth century” (2012, 188). *Wunderkammern* (wonders or miracles of the world) originated in the collections of relics in medieval churches, but appeared in the sixteenth century across Europe, and they were collected and displayed in the homes of aristocratic families. Already then, collecting was seen as beneficial in both an intellectual and a social sense; these repositories of knowledge both answered questions and piqued scientific curiosity” (“What Is a Cabinet” 2019). They were also relevant in a tangible manner, as they combined the intellectual and the physical. Likewise, Lutz’s cabinet scrutinises the intellectual and the physical sides of the Brontë sisters in a text that itself reproduces the tradition of the cabinet of wonders. The nine chapters display disparate objects, remnants of the Victorian past as well as of the Brontës’ lives, providing a palatable narrative of the individual and the collective. The chapters are entitled: “Tiny Books,” “Pillopatate.,” “Out Walking,” “Keeper, Grasper, and Other Family Animals,” “Fugitive Letters,” “The Alchemy of Desks,” “Death Made Material,” “Memory Albums,” and “Migrant Relics. In relation to this, three chapters/objects deserve particular attention: “Fugitive Letters,” “Death Made Material,” and “Memory Albums.”

The “Fugitive Letters” chapter is, in fact, a companion piece to “Tiny Books,” which covers the well-known miniature books that the Brontë sisters and Branwell Brontë made when they were little. They were penned, read, but also treasured with much care. The discussion of their tiny books leads Lutz to the consideration of the book, as an object, in the

Victorian world, and Lutz argues that “the book was savored ... as a material object, as a papery thing that might be fusty, fragrant, even tasty ... books were *things* to be manipulated, made personal, appreciated in a tactile way” (2015a, 16; emphasis in original). Books were clothed with materials from the kitchen or from home textiles and fabrics, and most of them were bound in leather, and some “contained animal paper” which exuded characteristic smells, and held the traces of flesh (Lutz 2015a, 24). It remains clear that back then, in Victorian times, and in the Brontës’ daily life, there was a close relationship between the body and the book, an embodied relationship which concerned not only books, but also paper. Letters became edible items for Charlotte Brontë when writing her letters to her friend Ellen Nussey, her life-long friend and correspondent: “your notes are meat and drink to me” (Lutz 2015a, 127), but also were containers of pieces, for example, locks of hairs which had a polysemic significance, as Lutz sustains: “[a] pledge of future friendship...a dash of the romantic, even the talismanic ... at times, giving one’s hair worked as an erotic promise of the body” (2015a, 128). Books and paper, then, become intertwined with the body, and this is particularly staged in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), as has been noted.

Indeed, “paper and books could hold traces of each body’s unique presence. This worldview makes it into written texts themselves i.e. *Villette*” (Taylor 2015). Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* provides a fit example of the closeness between the book, paper and letter writing,⁵ on the one hand, and the body, on the other. When Lucy receives a letter from Dr. John, her reaction is that of delight and happiness, and her feelings are described in third person, as if belonging to someone else: “The poor English teacher in the frosty garret, reading by a dim candle guttering in the wintry air, a letter simply good-natured—nothing more: though that good-nature then seemed to me god-like—was happier than most queens in palaces” (Brontë 1993 [1853], 239). As Crowther suggests, in a novel originally entitled “Thing town” (Choseville), the fear of losing personal connection, amidst things and

commodities, is one of the central things (2010, 133). The letter, an object, helps Lucy preserve her autonomous subject, and that of the sender, Dr. John. In so doing, the focus is on subjectivity and on the individual writer, thus avoiding being considered another commodity. Also, the letter becomes the tangible proof for Lucy of their relationship. In *Villette*, then, there is an emphasis on the individual material form against commodification in the age of mass reproduction: “letters, books and other manuscripts which are prized for both their textuality (their semantic meaning) *and* their materiality and are purposefully preserved, casketed away or buried. These textual relics serve as memorials of the connection between the writer and the manuscript which bears the trace of her body ... Lucy’s need to hide, protect, and eventually bury the letters written to her by Dr John represents the text’s desire to preserve the connection between writing and the hand of the writer” (Crowther 129). This embodied connection with the textual in *Villette* is reproduced in Lutz’s *The Brontë Cabinet*. Lutz’s work possesses the same memorialising function as the textual relics are based upon physical objects: it bears the traces of the bodies and of their lives. As the trace is not only concerned with the past, as mentioned before, Lutz’s book offers a dynamic interrelation of multiple temporal orientation (past, present and future). It seems that, to varying degrees, Charlotte Brontë and Lutz agree on “re-establishing the human connection to the world of objects ... the texts must be preserved ... to endure over time as material markers of both text and body” (Crowther 135).

Given that the book is a memory object, offering a multifaceted notion of temporalities, it also had “boxlike qualities” (Lutz 2015a, 19) in the Victorian era, which made it very difficult to distinguish from keepsakes, scrapbooks or albums. In other words, books served purposes other than reading, for example to keep items of all kinds inside such as flowers, letters and notes. Related to this notion of books as memory objects, the Brontë’s miniature volumes, with their Angria and Gondal worlds, were relevant as memorabilia, and

fulfilled the role of a coping strategy to alleviate the pain of loss: “Thus miniaturizing the Angrians, the children render their own bodies gigantic and powerful, doubly mitigating the distance between the flawed bodies of the living and the imaginatively perfect bodies of the dead. Finally, the little books function to protect that carefully reconstructed family from threat of loss” (Brown 1998, 413). Seen in this light, *The Brontë Cabinet* resembles a box, or a keepsake, also possessing ‘boxlike qualities’, as it comprises several items preserved in a safe container, the book. Therefore, Lutz’s piece takes the embodied form of a cabinet, but also a multi-layered box, a storage space or a keepsake, which memorialises the past and the dead, and keeps them safe for the reader to open their secrets, and to conjure up their presences. Memorialising the dead was common practice in the Victorian world, and this could be literal, for example, when locks of hair were incrustated in jewellery.

In April 2019 a ring with a lock of braided hair was found in a Welsh attic. According to the Brontë Society, it was “very likely” to have belonged to Charlotte Brontë, and possibly to have been her hair (Flood 2019). Galia Ofek has explored the fetishisation of the hair in Victorian times, particularly, hair memorabilia. She saw in the act of incrusting hair in medallions, locketts and rings “a process of containment, control and possession” (2009, 51). However, these pieces of jewellery and hair keepsakes have survived over time and they have inspired other stories and narratives, generating “meanings and myths which were wholly unsuspected by, and at times unrelated to, the people who exchanged them” (2). Lutz analyses hair memorabilia as the Victorians’ celebration of death through the perspective of thing theory in her *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* (2015). In this study, Lutz scrutinises the ways in which the “Victorians expressed a desire to touch the death that surrounds life, to feel its presence as material, vital” (2015b, 127). The last chapter of Lutz’s *Relics of Death* is devoted to hair jewellery and she mentions Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) where Heathcliff hopes to maintain her bond with Catherine through the

existence of a lock of hair (Lutz 2015b, 141). By the mid-nineteenth century, hair jewellery became very fashionable, and when related to death, these jewels were crypts or tombs, as they metonymically represented the corpse, fragments standing in for the whole. In her *The Brontë Cabinet*, Lutz expands on her work on hair and hair jewellery, previously explored in her *Relics of Death*, and connects this fascination with the “desire for a physical connection with the dead [which] has its roots in the wearing of saints’ hair in amulets” (2015a, 202). It has to be remembered that, initially, the cabinet of curiosities retained some supernatural quality that could trace back to the relic collections of things associated with saints, Christ, and his apostles: “something of the atmosphere of the supernatural that belonged to [relics] passed to cabinets of curiosities, so that alchemy, the occult and magic were never very far away” (Mauriès 2002, 1). In a way, Lutz’s cabinet of Brontë’s ‘curiosities’ keeps the supernatural element as the author aims at conjuring up and resurrecting the dead through their objects.

Remembrance of time, friends and family through albums was another way for the Victorians to actively memorialise, as they contributed to keep memory intact by celebrating life experiences, by means of collecting pieces and fragments related to families and friends. In relation to this, in the chapter “Memory Albums”, Lutz refers to Charlotte Brontë’s passion for “fern books,” where she pasted the ferns that she gathered from several places. In that she followed many Victorians since there was a craze for ferns in that period. These “fern books” are discussed alongside the presence of albums and scrapbooks, and, according to Lutz, in the nineteenth century “unlike with a box, case, or cabinet, the album provided a means to order objects not only on a page but also within the chronology of the volume” (Lutz 2015a, 233). In between public and private spaces, the album was both an object and a text, and it was inextricably connected to the feminine subjectivity, but allowed for competing meanings attached to “more complex and subtle functions for albums in the social, affective, and erotic

lives of the books' female owners and their circles ... [a] model of the album as space of imagination and self-definition" (Matthews 2012, 109). Lutz relates Charlotte Brontë's collection of ferns (her only album) to her marriage to Nicholls, and at the end of the chapter, she refers to the ways in which Charlotte Brontë herself became a "thing," and was "collected" in albums. Not only did she appear in albums and scrapbooks, but also Haworth parsonage and the moors were kept in collections by means of photography and postcards. Thus, the subject-object dichotomy was dismantled when the subject (the writer) became objectified in an album. This answers what Boehm argues for in her introduction to *Bodies and Things in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* where she brings "subjects and objects into intimate proximity, or begin[s] to render their positions reciprocal and interchangeable" (10), becoming subject and object quasi-subject and quasi-object, respectively, following Serres. Conversely, the artefacts displayed in *The Brontë Cabinet* acquire quasi-subject characteristics in the treatment they receive by Lutz, since they are in a way personified, as in this case: "Through the 'eyes' of thread, paper, wood, jet, hair, bone, brass, fur, frond, leather, velvet, and ash, new corners and even rooms of these Victorian women's lives light up for us" (2015a, xxiv-xxv).

The above discussion evinces the relevance of materiality for the Brontës, for the Victorian household and for the Victorian period, in general. In addition, it highlights the 'material turn' that has taken place in recent historical and literary scholarship. This approach to materiality is in keeping with an increasing interest in the senses and phenomenology. Precisely, Lutz refers to the senses on several occasions, and from the very beginning the power of the senses is evoked to conjure up and to resurrect inanimate objects by infusing life into them: "[a] nightshirt, a ring, a book, infused with the past, might reanimate it, when approached with all the senses" (2015a, xxi). She mentions touch, sight, hear, taste and smell in her exploration of the role played by the objects in close connection with the Brontë

sisters. One book, *Russell's General Atlas of Modern Geography* (1842), was extremely used by the inhabitants of the parsonage, and the proof that the book was much read and consulted by the siblings was the state of its pages, that of the leather binding, and the smell it exuded, that Lutz calls "a fragrance," a somewhat (in)tangible trace "of sweaty flesh that pressed and held it has imbued the pages and binding" (2015a, 15). One reviewer has also noted the relevance conceded to smells exuding from the objects mentioned in Lutz's text, that "revels in the smell of some of the Brontë-related artefacts she has encountered" (Miller 2015).

Phenomenology helps us understand sensory perception in Lutz's work, a cabinet and a collection, which shows the porosity of the boundaries between the individual and the world, subject and object. According to Victoria Mills, "collecting highlights a physical continuum between the body and the material world of which it is a part" (2013, 41), and it has to be remembered that Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology underlines the notion of the body as a thing and the apprehension of the world through the senses. In fact, "the object of phenomenological investigation is the phenomenal field: the worldly region perceived, as presented to the perceiver" (Romdenh-Romluc 2011, 35). In Merleau-Ponty's words, "one's own body is both a constituted and constituting object *in relation to* other objects" (2002, 275; emphasis added). This emphasis on the relationship between humans and things is key to the understanding of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which calls for an enquiry of the everyday and the importance of ordinary life (Thomas 2006, 56). Lutz's project focuses on precisely the quotidian by paying attention to the objects they used in their daily lives. Therefore, phenomenology as a critical approach also throws light into the portrayal of objects and humans, and into the in-between space that generates flows, waves and meanings: "The pleasures of collecting traverse the Victorian sensorium as sensory responses to things combine with emotional reactions to produce affective relationships with objects" (Mills 43). It remains clear that collecting, in general, and Lutz's special cabinet and collection, in

particular, seems to call for “an ontology not of things but of sensorial flows and movements; not of bodies but of corporeal landscapes, of trans-corporeality; not of single actions but of continuous inter-animation” (Hamilakis 2013, 116).

Object-oriented ontology, which partakes of the new materialist approach, does not agree on the above-mentioned “ontology of sensorial flows” and to the world being defined by fluid relations. OOO supports the notion that “objects—whether real, fictional, natural, artificial, human or non-human—are mutually autonomous and enter into relation only in special cases” (Harman 2018, 12). Following philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, Harman claims that only under special circumstances, for example, through aesthetics is it possible to make contact with the thing itself: “along with Ortega we face the apparently impossible task of preserving the inaccessibility of the things-in-themselves while also defending the claim of art to make contact with the executant inwardness of these things: *a touching without touching*, so to speak” (82; emphasis added). Lutz’s portrayal of things in her *The Brontë Cabinet* puts us in contact with the “inwardness” of the objects mentioned and explored, touching them “without touching.” Interestingly, new materialities claim to counterbalance an emphasis on process and immaterial production, as well as on the notion of constant flows, endless process and disembodiment, so prevalent today in critical quarters. This premise is supported by Rejack who follows OOO and sees the inherent danger in focusing merely on “pure flows and endless process” because this means to “embrace twenty-first-century global capitalism and its fantasies of immaterial production” (2016).

However, the human component, the subject, is never dismissed in Lutz’s piece. In fact, she does not align with the metaphysicians of objects, as those proposing OOO, since her aim is “to come closer to [the Brontës]” (2015a, xx) on the basis that an object acquires meaning in relation to the human. This sensorial relation to materiality stresses multi-temporality or polytemporality since “sensorial perception is shaped by memories”

(Hamilakis 119). In addition, sensoriality cannot be separated from the affective, and this is particularly relevant in the case of Lutz's *The Brontë Cabinet* where both the author and the reader engage in an affective encounter with the Brontës, as well as with the Victorian past. This affective relation traverses and crosses the subject-object dichotomy into a space of flows and dynamic movements, thus highlighting "collective entanglements and relationships" (125). All in all, this affective encounter is particularly noticeable towards the end of Lutz's work when the author pays close attention to the effect that the Brontë Parsonage and Haworth have upon admirers, and the feelings aroused by the visit to the birthplace of the Brontë family: "one afternoon when I was starting up the steep incline of Main Street, I passed a young woman in black leather pants, her long hair dyed black. She stood still. Her face showed such fervor that I found myself looking away. The raw strength of her passion felt too private for a stranger to gaze on" (2015a, 255). In referring to a visitor's reaction to a paying visit to the Brontë Parsonage, Lutz establishes a connection with that visitor in an affective manner, but at the same time distances herself from her to avoid overidentification and erasure of subject identity. In a way, this illustrates Lutz's approach to the relationship between objects and the Brontës in her in-between text, probing into the boundaries of subject and object, inside and outside, fiction and fact, in order to both re-animate the Brontës for the contemporary reader, and situate them in their own context. This way, Lutz's cabinet of objects produces meanings when the objects are brought in contact with the humans that possessed, caressed, and engaged with those artefacts. Only in relation to one another, to the Brontë sisters, and to other authors, texts and contexts, this collection succeeds in resurrecting the Victorian material past, and the individual figures, for the contemporary reader, but it also provides a space for critique and reflection on a tension perceived in contemporary culture: the tension between embodiment vs. disembodiment; subject/object vs. constant flow and endless process; loneliness and loss of personal

connection vs. endurance and survival. Finally, in looking back to the past, *The Brontë Cabinet*, a memory object, also deals with pressing issues of today, which definitively mobilise and fuel our orientation towards the future, thus offering polytemporality as the contemporary response to things Victorian.

NOTES

1. This essay has been funded by the MINECO project FFI2017-86417-P.
2. Lutz's *The Brontë Cabinet* and Kathryn Hughes' *Victorians Undone: Tales of the Flesh in the Age of Decorum* (2017) both share an interest in the 'material turn' in contemporary scholarships, not only on the part of the historians but also on the part of the literary scholars, and more specifically those dealing with biographies. Like Lutz, Hughes states her interest in writing the lives of eminent Victorians by paying attention to objects, "rather than simply chase through text after text towards an ever-receding horizon" (xiv). Her "embodied history" is much alike to Lutz's biography of the Brontës since both texts infuse life into Victorian authors through the body and bodily-related objects and things.
3. See, for example, Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham (2019, 213–21), and Arias (2017, 41–53).
4. Ian Hodder pays attention to the gap in the existing field of human dependence on things, which is the omission of "the discourse on things and the things (and their connections) themselves" (27). However, this gap has been filled, at least partly, by OOO and new materialist theories.
5. To find further information about the role of letters, see Laird (2016, 473–504).

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