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The Scottish Network Novel

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While critical celebrations of the stylistic and thematic diversity of contemporary Scottish fiction are commonplace, few critics have attended to the implications of that diversity for formal analysis, and for a broader understanding of Scottish literature itself. This article establishes a model of the Scottish network novel, which provides an opportunity to reconsider the relations between essentialist and open-ended critical approaches, and to place a diverse set of texts in relation and generate new insights. Following a survey of the current critical field, the article introduces its model through examples from well-known texts by Jackie Kay, James Kelman, and Ali Smith, before turning to case studies featuring works by Leila Aboulela, Douglas Bruton, Linda Cracknell, David Keenan, Jon McGregor, and Maggie O'Farrell. By emphasising the importance of multivocal narration and nonlinear temporality in these texts, as well as a focus on everyday labour and repetition, the article suggests that networks are both a dominant theme and structure within the novels themselves, and provide a transformative way to consider them together without being limited by pre-existing formulations of 'Scottishness'.

The diversity of Scottish literature is heralded in virtually every critical overview of the field. While in 2007 Berthold Schoene could question whether Scottish literature should 'continue to be burdened with an alleged national specificity, or should it be allowed to go cosmopolitan' (Schoene 2007: 8), few contemporary critics would now choose the former option. Whether framing their analysis in terms of cosmopolitanism, hybridity, or the inclusion of racialised and sexual minorities, the majority of contributors to Schoene's *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* highlight the variety of voices and forms within Scottish literature. As Kirsty Macdonald writes, 'the "new" Scottishness is represented as a fluid and forever renegotiable proliferation of possible identities' (Macdonald 2007: 335). This emphasis on fluidity continues to be almost axiomatic: surveying the field a decade later, in a special issue of this journal, Kate Turner and Jane Stedman suggest that the 'possibilities imagined by Scottish writers offer exciting potentialities for this time of flux and change' (Turner and Stedman 2017), while in her survey of post-devolutionary literature, Carla Sassi suggests that these texts foreground 'a new, more unstable and flexible – and consciously so – idea of national community' (Sassi 2022: 322). While this sense of flux and possibility has largely been approached in relation to literature produced since the 1997 devolution referendum, and in relation to the 2014 independence referendum, the sense that Scottish literature is not solely defined in relation to national identity, tradition, or constitutional change, or indeed in relation to particular tropes and themes, is consistent. Cairns Craig, for instance, reappraises G. Gregory Smith's foundational idea of the Caledonian anti-syzygy to argue against notions 'of a unified and coherent cultural tradition' in favour of 'disunity, conflict and contradiction' (Craig 2006: 51), while Gerard Carruthers characterises Scottish literature as a 'moving target' that is constantly 'in formation and also de-formation' (Carruthers 2024: 12). While their individual focuses may be very different, these critics – and dozens more could be substituted here – are united in opposing a homogenous or essentialist framing of Scottish literature.

As much as this emphasis on diversity and change has become a critical commonplace, however, its pervasiveness raises a set of questions that have not fully been addressed. As Churnjeet Mahn argues, Scottish literary criticism has at times succumbed to 'the temptation to take particular modalities of social form [...] and read them as new, or recent, interlocutors in the aesthetic conditions of belonging in, or apprehending, Scottish culture' (Mahn 2024: 79–80). Scottish criticism, Mahn cautions, might seem to embrace a rhetoric of inclusion, particularly concerning queer, feminist, racialised, or immigrant voices, under an 'additive' model, which she cautions 'is a stock trope of neoliberalism' (85): rather than fully evaluating what these voices might mean for the broader conception of canons or traditions, they are

evaluated within pre-existing frameworks and categories. In this model, which many of the critics above certainly resist, the addition of 'diverse' voices to discussions of Scottish literature ultimately cements the authority and stability of extant approaches. Mahn's critique aligns with Caroline Levine's more wide-ranging discussion of 'anti-instrumentality' in the humanities. Levine frames a wide variety of scholarship and theoretical positions in relation to 'three key moves: the pause, the rupture, and the dissolve' (Levine 2023: 1). These moves contain many of the key terms used in Scottish criticism, such as 'open-endedness', 'revolution', 'dismantling', 'fluidity', 'hybridity', and so forth. While the aim of these interventions, Levine argues, is clearly to challenge received orthodoxies and 'crack the world open to alternative ways of thinking and being', a reliance on the rhetoric of open-endedness can also justify 'an avoidance of planning and building' (1, 10). For both Mahn and Levine, in different contexts, while calls for diversity, inclusivity, and fluidity are certainly welcome, they can easily lead either to an un-examined reliance on earlier ways of thinking, or to an emphasis on ambiguity that leads to stasis. For both thinkers, the potential solution to this dilemma is an increased emphasis on form. In recognising that form is everywhere, and that literary and national forms must be seen in – sometimes contested – relation, Mahn and Levine offer the promise of a more interventionist and practical criticism.

This article, then, while following from the above discussions of fluidity, hybridity, and productive contradiction, proposes the need for an increased emphasis on form in discussions of contemporary Scottish literature. In particular, I argue for the notion of the 'Scottish network novel', building on Sam McBean's formulation of the 'queer network novel' and assemblage theory. The network novel, as defined by McBean, 'explores the network as not a "set" structure of contemporary existence but a "doing"' (McBean 2019: 430). As such, the network novel exemplifies the interplay between form, aesthetics, and theme central to contemporary literary study while also offering the opportunity to resituate literary texts as active cultural productions. My focus is not simply on what forms of community, temporality, and identity these novels portray, but how, formally, they do so. In proposing the network novel as a prominent form in contemporary Scottish writing I wish neither to suggest that it is the only form of note, nor are the case studies below positioned as comprehensive: to do so would be to formulate an essentialist conceptualisation of Scottish literature that virtually all critics, including myself, are seeking to avoid. Rather, examining the networks within and between these novels, and between these texts and other works of Scottish and global fiction, provides an opportunity for reframing both recognised and lesser-known contemporary Scottish novels in terms of polyvocality and non-linear temporality, while also emphasising the connections between them. This approach

not only permits a further move away from examinations of 'Scottishness' as such, but also encourages a more instrumentalist reading of Scottish fictions. In order to demonstrate the applicability of this framework to a range of texts, the article begins with an overview of the Scottish network novel, grounded in three well-known novels from the turn of the twenty-first century, before moving to three case studies, each focusing on two novels, examining textual communities, place, and history.

Network, Community, and Assemblage

Drawing on both philosophical studies of temporality and queer phenomenology, Caroline Edwards proposes the network novel not simply as a way to represent the 'digital network of global communication' in the twenty-first century, but as a way to move past rigid conceptualisations of modernism and postmodernism. Network, or networked, novels, in her definition, 'knit together a disparate set of temporal (and frequently disjunct spatial) locations that are interconnected at the level of narrative structure, as well as being thematically interlaced' (Edwards 2019: 15). Network novels are formally distinguished by troubling the borders between the novel and the short story collection; in a discussion of Jon McGregor, whose work is pivotal to Edwards's argument and the second case study below, Adele Guyton applies Elke D'hoker's term 'composite novel' to describe this interplay of forms (Guyton 2023). Network novels are not only formally discontinuous, but frequently combine multiple timeframes and narrative perspectives to challenge traditional modes of narrative authority and structure. The network novel is frequently unbounded by the customs of traditional realism; Edwards points to novels such as Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (2001) and Kate Atkinson's *Life after Life* (2013), which incorporate dead narrators who provide alternatives to linear understandings of time. Network novels frequently deemphasise causal relations between their component parts in favour of 'webs of connection' (McBean 2019: 433) that may be more or less explicit.

As Sianne Ngai, among others, clarifies, 'networks as a form of social organization are by no means exclusive to postmodernity', but have gained increasing emphasis in a variety of discourses in the past decades (Ngai 2012: 367). Certainly the contemporary network novel owes much, formally, to the Victorian multiplot novel, which combines multiple perspectives so that each element, in Peter Garrett's words, is readable 'as the component of a larger pattern and as an independent focus of interest' (Garrett 1980: 8). Patrick Jagoda clarifies, however, that in the twenty-first century 'connection is less an imperative than it is the infrastructural basis of everything' (Jagoda 2016: 1). The network novel does not simply reveal the infrastructural connections that define

contemporary life, or apply a contemporary perspective to other historical moments. Rather, Jagoda emphasises that focusing on connection reveals its limitations:

> connection, in our time, has become an assemblage of ordinary problems that animate the spectrum between linkage and disconnection – problems that nonetheless retain some traces of an earlier yearning for contact and generate a sense of networks that do not quite work. (Jagoda 2016: 7)

That is, while notions like 'everything is connected' might seem to lead to the same sorts of open-ended ambiguities found in similar discourses of hybridity or fluidity, one of the benefits of a network model is the way it draws attention to the failure of connection. McBean, emphasising the queer origins of network models, articulates how in Hanya Yanigahara's *A Little Life* (2015) the network is presented not simply as 'a banal structure of contemporary life' but 'as a labor' (McBean 2019: 439). Networks require agency to be sustained, and sometimes they collapse. While D'hoker argues that the term 'network novel' is 'too specific and unfamiliar to cover the whole range of novels that operate on the cross-roads of the integrated novel and the short story cycle' (D'hoker 2018: 27) – and similarly sees 'multivoiced' and 'cosmopolitan' as limited descriptors – the importance of the network as a structuring principle is that it allows for a combined focus on the formal mechanics of the novel and the networks it represents. The network novel, as I define it, is both comprised of networks and thematically centred on networks, and in both aspects reveals failures as much as success (or simply pervasiveness). As such, it is one of the best forms available to examine not just the way in which contemporary culture, or literature, is hybrid, cosmopolitan, fluid, and so on, but to examine the implications of those assertions.

Given that the network novel is necessarily a global form, however, and that even within an Anglophone sphere key exemplars are as likely to come from the United States (e.g. Jennifer Egan and Don DeLillo) as the United Kingdom (e.g. David Mitchell), the question remains why identifying a specifically Scottish network novel remains necessary, or even possible. Within a Scottish critical context, ideas of networks can be traced to the longstanding centrality of community in approaches to the novel. Francis Russell Hart closes his survey of the Scottish novel with a focus on 'the moral primacy of community' in many novels, whether valued in itself or defined as 'the terrifying fact of interconnectedness' (Hart 1978: 401–2). For Craig, community is defined by the 'mutual dependence of the fearful and fearless [that] is the recurring moral problem posed by the modern Scottish novel' (Craig 1999: 52). Whether community is posed as

vibrant or static, repressive or liberating, the community, usually defined in relation to the small town or village, is the dominant theme of much nineteenth and twentieth-century Scottish fiction. In many canonical novels, the local community is the fundamental basis for individual relation: individuals may flee from the harmful gossip of the community (e.g. George Douglas Brown's *The House with the Green Shutters* [1901]) or attempt to challenge its conservativism (e.g. Willa Muir's *Imagined Corners* [1935]); they may understand themselves through the role they play in the community (e.g. George Mackay Brown's *Greenvoe* [1972]); they may find themselves ostracised from community (e.g. James Kelman's *How late it was, how late* [1994] and Janice Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* [1989]). However individuals approach community, it is repeatedly positioned as the central form of relation: how and who individuals are is defined by the networks they establish, or are forced into, in their community. While of these novels *Greenvoe* is the best formal example of a network novel, each of them, and many others, makes the network of social relations its central theme.

The interplay between fictional forms or representations of community and political practice has similarly remained a mainstay of criticism. Scott Lyall, for instance, closes his survey of community in twentieth-century Scottish fiction by noting the importance of online communities in the independence referendum; he argues that these 'new imagined communities have contributed to a reshaping of the idea of community and the imagined community that is Scotland' (Lyall 2016: 24). Two decades earlier, in the inaugural edition of the interdisciplinary journal *Scotlands*, Robert Crawford argues that '[t]oo many of us like to believe that there is one true Scotland and everything else is a fake, a kailyardism, a Harry Lauderism' (Crawford 1994: 57); he instead proposes a set of multiple 'Scotlands' that 'precede, accompany, and follow Scotland' (56). Crawford proposes a Bakhtinian model of dialogue and interplay that welcomes dissenting voices. Yet, as Scott Hames declares, dialogue and interplay within Scottish literature all too easily become co-opted in essentialist narratives:

> The key Scottish novelists of the past few decades largely reject the ambassadorial politics of 'representation' enshrined in parliamentary democracy, yet they are continually presented as the models and cultural guarantors of Scottish devolution understood as the (incomplete) recovery of national agency and identity via parliamentary representation. (Hames 2020: 40)

Hames's reading echoes, in some senses, Mahn's claims above. As much as calls for, or reports of, Scottish literature as diverse, hybrid, and dialogic may be true or relevant, their reception frequently tends back towards the essentialist. Too often the

multiple Scotlands which people inhabit or imagine are related, or simply added, to a pre-imagined 'one true Scotland'. As Alex Thomson has influentially argued, there is often a reductive slippage in Scottish literary criticism where 'the attempt to write an inductive survey of texts chosen on "national" grounds – however flexibly and subtly we understand that criterion – will always become an analysis of texts in terms of the extent to which they display "Scottish" traits' (Thomson 2007: 6). For Thomson, framing a text as 'Scottish' leads to an immediate questioning of what is 'Scottish' about that text.

Recognising the persistence of essentialist approaches does not negate Crawford's call for multiplicity or Lyall's for new ways of imagining and reshaping. While these are well-rehearsed debates within the field, the fact that such debates continue to this day suggests their continued importance. While this article cannot hope definitively to answer these questions, I propose that the network novel has already offered ways to move beyond them. To illustrate this, I will first examine three novels from the turn of the twenty-first century by authors firmly enmeshed in any canon of Scottish literature: Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998), Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (2001), and James Kelman's *Translated Accounts* (2001). While all are technically post-devolutionary texts – although Kay and Kelman both began writing theirs before 1997 – they are for the most part unconcerned with questions of national identity: Kay's novel is set in Glasgow, while Smith's is in an unnamed, intentionally ambiguous British city, and Kelman's in an unnamed, intentionally ambiguous 'occupied territory or land where a form of martial law appears in operation' (Kelman 2001: ix). All three have frequently been positioned in terms of multivoiced or composite novels, and *Hotel World*, like Smith's more recent publications, is often mentioned in discussions of network fiction. What separates these three texts from earlier paradigmatic examples of Scottish network fiction such as Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993) is that they not only combine elements of the novel and short story cycle to shed light on a particular community, but also devote particular emphasis to how this community is textually constructed. While the use of multiple narrators or focalisers is a common feature of contemporary Scottish state of the nation novels, for instance – whether the nation in question is Scotland or the United Kingdom – such as James Robertson's *And the Land Lay Still* (2010), A.L Kennedy's *Serious Sweet* (2016), Kirstin Innes's *Scabby Queen* (2020), and Andrew O'Hagan's *Caledonian Road* (2024), these three novels focus less on representing existing communities than in constructing them. Communities are created through writing as much as lived experience, and often erased the same way.

Trumpet tells the story of the Glaswegian trumpeter Joss Moody from a variety of perspectives, catalysed by the discovery after his death that he was anatomically female. The novel has largely been celebrated for its early depiction of Black and queer lives, and the way Kay adapts the novel form to make space for marginalised voices that may not fit into traditional forms of narration. Moody's story challenges familiar representations of Glaswegian life; rather than simply adding to the tradition of the Glasgow novel, Kay disrupts it by showing the complexity and diversity of perspectives that exist in constellation. As Tracy Hargreaves writes, the novel is simultaneously a 'polyphonic memorializing of loss', where, as in *Hotel World*, the reader witnesses both a range of emotional responses to a death and the often hostile social context surrounding it, and a study of 'which specific cultural inquiries license a body's visibility or invisibility, its legibility or erasure' (Hargreaves 2003: 2). The themes of mourning and embodiment are united by the network structure of the novel. It opens with a long, lyrical set of memories from Moody's wife Millie, emphasising their ordinary Glasgow life: 'We dance at the Barrowland way into the early hours. The atmosphere, jumping. The dance style, gallus. There is no tomorrow' (Kay 2016: 15). For the first 15% of the novel, the reader has no indication that this will be anything other than a linear, first-person narrative. The sudden intrusion of the brief chapter 'People: The Doctor', upends the reader's expectations: it details Moody's post-mortem from the perspective of a Doctor Krishnamurty, who on examination of Moody's body crosses out the word 'male' on a form and writes '"female" in large childish letters' (44). The description of Moody as female marks an interruption both of the narrative of the novel and the official paperwork being described. As *Trumpet*'s network expands over the following sections, the question of who has the right to write about Moody – whether the registrar Mohammad Nassar Sharif, who finds Krishnamurty's alteration of the form 'unnecessarily violent' (77) or the predatory journalist Sophie Stones, who pursues and reshapes the story because '[p]eople are interested in weirdos' (125) – is amplified. The polyvocal narration suggests not only that individuals are known in relation, and often defined by preconceptions, but that writing itself is a form of challenging or reifying both individual and collective identities. Kay uses the network form simultaneously to integrate marginalised voices into the Scottish novel and reveal the way various forms of writing act to suppress them. Moody's story, the novel implies, could not be told in a more unified or linear manner, because familiar forms of narration already exclude people like Moody.

In the penultimate section, titled 'Last Word', Moody himself – or so the reader assumes, although the speaker is not identified – tells the story of his father's arrival from Africa, where he finds Scotland to be a '[g]host country' (271) and declares that

he is always haunted by his own country. Moody explains that he has left 'his letters, photographs, records, documents, certificates' (276) for his son Colman, whose shift from anger to begrudging acceptance of Moody's identity is one of the novel's main emotional arcs. The human network of the novel is expanded to include more times, and aspects of the immigrant experience, than previously, while the combination of formal written documents and oral ghost stories is necessary to convey this experience. The scope is no longer the life of one man, but an imagined community of immigrants and all those whose lives have been excluded from national narratives. Yet the novel concludes far more simply, with a single paragraph where a woman sees a man, and watches a bird 'soar right up into the sky, its wings dipping, faltering and rising again, heard it calling and scatting in the wind' (278). The humans are likely Millie and Colman, but not necessarily; the scatting bird is almost, but not quite, Moody's ghost. Instead, what the reader is left with is not resolution, but an ongoing everydayness. Kay's focus on the ordinary, as exemplified by Millie's sections of the text, parallels Levine's argument for the 'revaluing [of] mundane work that keeps life going over time' (Levine 2023: 19). While Levine critiques, however, the elevation of 'rupture over stability' in the aesthetic humanities, calling for 'repetition [to become] the interesting, meaningful foreground rather than the wearisome, constraining backdrop' (120–1), *Trumpet*'s success is in combining the two. The novel's importance to Scottish literature is partly in its rupture, and the way it creates new forms to describe previously-excluded networks. Its value is also, however, in the way that it continually reverts to the ordinary. Moody's life is significant not only because of his racial or gender identity, or even his musical talent, but because he is loved in the most ordinary of ways.

This use of experimental, discontinuous form to emphasise the routines of daily life and love is echoed in *Hotel World*. The afterword to the 2016 edition of *Trumpet* is a conversation between Smith and Kay in which they discuss their friendship and writing: Kay concludes that the novel is not only a 'big social form' but a 'sociable' one (Kay 2016: 290). The social worlds within the novels thus parallel the social worlds outside: if both novels are individual enterprises, they are best understood as part of a writing, publishing, and friendship network. Like *Trumpet*, *Hotel World* is the study of a death which involves the mourning of loved ones, the intrusion of a crass journalist, and the obfuscating power of government paperwork. The death in question is of Sara Wilby, a teenager with none of Moody's fame; the impact of her death, however, from her sister's unprocessed grief to the sentiments of a girl at a watch shop whom she might have one day loved, are similarly wide. Placing the novels together shows how each life is known in various networks, and is central to them, regardless of fame or identity. Each of the novel's five main sections is titled after a grammatical tense (but not written

in that tense), and concerns the loss of language: Sara, as a ghost, forgets words; Else, an unhoused woman on the streets, loses her vowels ('Spr sm chn', she asks [Smith 2001: 35]); Lise, a hotel receptionist, struggles to fill out disability claim forms; Penny, a journalist, writes meaningless descriptions of the hotel; Clare, Sara's sister, speaks in a rush of clauses with no full stops or commas, only connecting ampersands. While dozens of critics have written on the novel in terms of grief, trauma, capitalism, and place, as well as an example of multivoiced narration, Emma E. Smith usefully analyses the novel as an example of narrative democracy, which in her words 'means moving away from an idealized collectivity, toward a conception of the intersubjective relations between self and community as both antagonistic and mutually constitutive' (Smith 2010: 84). This is precisely the move I see as central to the Scottish network novel, which does not simply add new voices to a pre-existing collective, but reconceptualises social and textual networks.

Like *Trumpet*, *Hotel World* radically extends the novel's network in the final pages, in the sixth section, 'Present', which is curiously under-discussed in the majority of critical approaches. The section revisits minor characters who may have been only glimpsed earlier on as they go through their everyday routines: '[t]he woman who runs the café is waiting in the quiet that comes before the rush every morning', for instance (Smith 2001: 232). The woman has no particular significance to the plot; her appearance here suggests simply that all we have read, with its drama and experimental form, is still part of a collective ordinary. At the same time, historical figures real and imagined appear, as ghosts, as their names are read or imagined, whether Princess Diana and Dusty Springfield or one Mrs M. Reid, whose name is revealed when the sign above her candyshop in the 'misty, cold-bound Highlands' (226) is changed. England and Scotland, the past and present, are all combined in a new textual network. This network, crucially, is only available to the reader: the ghosts appear as they are read, by us, and the community has no reference point or unifying feature except that it appears within this novel. The novel ends with birds, echoing *Trumpet* and incorporating an allusion to Thomas Hardy's 'Proud Songsters': intertextuality itself is a network. Both Kay's and Smith's novels emphasise the importance of approaching different scales of network – familial, local, global, and textual – together; by trusting the reader to create connections between different textual elements and passages, they also include the reading experience as part of an extended network.

Translated Accounts occupies a slightly different role in a consideration of the Scottish network novel. While Kay's and Smith's works employ structural and thematic elements they use in other texts, *Translated Accounts* seems like a departure from Kelman's 'careful articulation of the territorial and spatial dimensions *of a place called Glasgow*'

(Miller and Rodger 2012: 152). The novel consists of 54 numbered accounts 'by three, four or more anonymous individuals of a people whose identity is not available'; these accounts have further 'been transcribed and/or translated into English, not always by persons native to the tongue', and at times redacted (Kelman 2001: ix). Not only does the novel dispense with plot, setting, and character as traditionally understood, but the reader's knowledge that the accounts have been multiply mediated means it is virtually impossible to ascertain if the text the reader encounters carries the speaker's intended meaning. In a simple statement such as '[t]he mist clung to us, we were herded, the chill, the children' (3), 'chill' may refer to the mist, or represent a stuttering attempt to say 'children': it is impossible to know. As such, the novel as a whole is one of the clearest examples of a Deleuzian assemblage, where the 'minimum real unit is not the word, the idea, the concept or the signifier, but the assemblage' (Deleuze and Parnet 2006: 38). To focus on any single sentence or story as containing the novel's central theme, or as referring to a knowable external reality, would be inherently misleading: the novel must be taken as a whole, as an assemblage or network.

Like Kay's and Smith's novels, *Translated Accounts* foregrounds the mechanical failures of writing. The long narrative '¿FODocument' contains dozens of lines of computer-generated gibberish – the sequence <#hÛ appearing 24 times before changing to <#hÒ, for instance (35) – that obscure and confuse its account of violent atrocities. What makes the text readable as a network novel is its focus on the technology of communication – whether using modern technology or, in one account, oral storytelling – as both obfuscating and revealing stories that cannot be said. '¿FODocument' ends with the words 'NBoDocumentnocurfewthateveningifwe may do so if wemaysppeakwemayspeak' (44), a line which is returned to by a single narrator in the final paragraph: 'There are events, I speak of them, if I am to speak then it is these, if I may speak' (322). For Kelman's narrators, speaking is a form of everyday action that is formed in networks. The novel does not illuminate any specific atrocity so much as it displays the relation between individual and collective experiences, witnessing, and reports of such atrocities. One speaker says: 'If I tell of what we do, I can, I can say of it a concatenation of images and conjectures, this is what it is. But this is to be human' (153). To be human is to exist in a communicative network, to bear witness to events that resist linear explanation. Like *Trumpet* and *Hotel World* Kelman's novel, for all of its evident challenges, carries a similar emphasis on the network as a fundamental form of human relation that incorporates but is not defined by pre-existing identities. For Peter Boxall *Translated Accounts*, like Kelman's other novels of the same period, examines 'the forces and pressures that are exerted on the contemporary imagination as it strives to conjure a sense of personhood from the conflicting violences – national, postnational,

economic – that dismember us' (Boxall 2010: 41). Kelman provides a way, in Boxall's optimistic reading, of showing how ordinary speech acts continue, despite oppression, and have an active function in the world. At the same time, however, foregrounding the violence of translation and mediation also provides a way, in Jagoda's words, 'to *practice* failure as a way of thinking through networks' (Jagoda 2016: 210). The individual narratives in the novel fail to cohere, and their function within a narrative is not inherently restorative. Even compared to the ambiguous endings of Kay's and Smith's texts, Kelman's novel fundamentally cannot resolve. Yet the placement of these accounts in relation opens the possibility of understanding them not only in connection to each other, but in a larger network of violence and atrocity. In the continued valuing of the desire to speak despite oppression, the novel testifies to the continuance of ordinary, repetitive life.

Taking these three novels together, several key features of the Scottish network novel emerge: 1) These texts are not necessarily concerned with, or limited by, pre-existing notions of 'Scottishness' or other identities; 2) The multivocal narration and nonlinear temporality encourage the reader to take an active interpretive role; 3) Rather than reaching towards narrative resolution, these novels often emphasise the continuance of everyday action; 4) They combine different scales of networks, from the familial to the global; 5) They emphasise writing, and textual networks, as both constitutive of human experience and potentially oppressive. This is not an exhaustive set of criteria, nor does every Scottish network novel include all of these elements. This formulation does, however, provide a way of seeing the network novel as a potential avenue for reconsidering the relation between essentialist and open-ended formulations of Scottish literature, and of making connections between novels that might seem unrelated. The novels discussed in the following case studies differ in setting, theme, origin and residency of author, historical period, and many other aspects. In their approach to network as both form and theme, however, they suggest some of the possibilities of network analysis for understanding dominant trends in twenty-first century Scottish fiction.

Case Study 1: Assembled Affinities and Textual Communities

In her account of the importance of affinities, which she defines as 'personal connections that have *potency*', Jennifer Mason distinguishes her model from both affect theory, which she sees as lacking analytic precision, and assemblage theory, which she describes as 'oddly lifeless' with no 'room for characters' (Mason 2018: 1, 171). Although rooted in sociology, Mason's book includes many examples from literary texts, including works by Kay, McGregor, and Maggie O'Farrell, discussed in case study three. Her articulation

of affinity as a form of assemblage that troubles linear temporality and overarching authority but also emphasises personal feelings and experiences provides a useful framework for looking at network novels as different as Douglas Bruton's *Hope Never Knew Horizon* (2024) and David Keenan's *This is Memorial Device* (2017). The novels' scopes are very different. Bruton's text interweaves three apparently unconnected stories: the discovery of a beached whale in Wexford in 1881, the life of Emily Dickinson in Massachusetts in the 1850s, and the story of a painter's model named Ada Alice Pullen in London in the 1880s. Each story is told in ten parts, which alternate throughout the novel. Keenan's novel is more historically limited, focusing on the (fictional) music scene in Airdrie in the early 1980s, told in 29 interviews, e-mails, and other first-person accounts, with a cast of almost one hundred characters. Bruton's text is for the most part straightforwardly realistic, while Keenan's is more experimental, including appendices and a comically exhaustive index. The texts are alike, however, in using a network form not simply to examine how novels work as a vehicle for communication and information, but to explore what Ngai calls a 'philosophy of connection' (Ngai 2012: 368). They combine the assemblage form of *Translated Accounts* with a focus on personal connection, both within and between their separate stories.

Bruton's novel, in its mixture of familiar and unfamiliar tales, emphasises the limitations of historical authority; a minor character in the Wexford tale is described as one whose 'name is also lost but she was real enough for this story' (Bruton 2024: 49), while in the London section George Bernard Shaw's name is only given, in passing, after a scene in which he appears (79). The emphasis is not on historical context, but on the emotional connections within the stories. The connections between the stories, however, are not clear until late in the novel, where the reader realises that 'hope' is the name given to the skeleton of the whale, the painting for which Pullen poses, and also figures in one of Dickinson's poems. In a brief epilogue Bruton writes that he 'hope[s] too that you have come to this book not in search of facts but to peer inside the head of someone thinking about hope' (188). The potentially abstract connection between the three stories becomes a way to think about the connection between author, characters, and reader. This is, in terms Levine and McBean might sympathise with, a fictional network as both labour and repetition: reading these apparently separate stories about the nature of hope invites the reader to think about their own connections and hopes. Given that hope is not historically or geographically limited as a concept, the stories must venture far beyond Scotland and the present, but the novel as a network provides a way to put disparate voices and stories together in what Rosi Braidotti calls 'a relational community, defined as a nomadic, transversal "assemblage" that involves non-human and technological media' (Braidotti 2019: 32–33). Whales and paintings,

Massachusetts and London, real and fictional, all coalesce into a new form of relation, but one that is always directed towards personal change.

The aims of Keenan's novel, in the words of its putative curator Ross Raymond, are more simply 'to stand up for Airdrie' (Keenan 2017: 1). The initial interviews are extensively prefaced by Raymond's own recollections, but he fades into the background as the novel progresses, making room for characters' hesitations, disfluencies, poor memories, and drunkenness. Characters state 'I don't want you to print my new name' (162) and 'forgive me if [my memories] tend to blur into one tremendous sigh' (242), while others playfully obfuscate: 'A history would imply something that could be pieced together and that could be made sense of. In that case I have no history of drug use to speak of' (181). No single voice can carry more authority than any other; as in *Translated Accounts*, it is not only the assemblage that carries weight, but the work the reader must do to connect the various nodes, and the inherent limitations of any such activity. Airdrie, the final speaker claims, is a place where 'everyone was so originally weird as to prevent most of them from servicing any fixed notion of possibility. It was impossible to be possible' (253). The possibility of making a life, or of remembering the past, is something that only can come from the combination of multiple incomplete narratives. It is the affinities the characters have for each other, and that the reader may have for similar moments or locations, that drive the narrative, such as it is. Both Bruton and Keenan use the network form to illustrate both the way the network novel can exceed itself, and the way it emphasises partiality and incompleteness: the network novel becomes a way to focus on ordinary forms of connection, hope, and loss.

Case Study 2: Aberdonian Networks

The network novel offers opportunities to approach Scottish locations outside the framework of the nation. Leila Aboulela's *River Spirit* (2023) uses multiple first-person narratives (and one second-person narrative, to depict General Charles George Gordon) to relay the history of Sudan from the beginnings of the Mahdi rebellion to the aftermath of the siege of Khartoum. McGregor's *So Many Ways to Begin* (2006) is organised by a catalogue of largely ephemeral physical objects (train tickets, postcards, and the like), illustrating the life of a former museum curator in Coventry, David Carter, his wife Eleanor, and their extended families. Other than their use of multiple perspectives or focal points to tell a historical story, the novels would appear to have nothing in common. Curiously, however, the city of Aberdeen is central to both of them. In McGregor's novel it is the site of David and Eleanor's youthful passion; McGregor states in an interview that it is important that the city is 'identifiable' (Edwards 2010: 243). Aboulela, who lives in Aberdeen and has set many of her works there, not only claims

that she is 'always trying to connect the two countries – Scotland and Sudan' (Drysdale 2023), but transposes the character of the Orientalist painter David Roberts, born in Edinburgh, to the fictional Robert, from Aberdeen. Aberdeen is a place that connects different temporalities and geographies: in *River Spirit* Aberdeen and Khartoum are both presented as the 'city with the two rivers' (Aboulela 2023: 101) while David recounts a visit to Aberdeen early in *So Many Ways to Begin* by telling Eleanor 'how different things were now' but that she could 'still recognise it' (McGregor 2007: 17). Aberdeen is not framed, as in previous criticism, as 'the most stubbornly provincial city in Britain' whose literature has been 'dominated by a single theme [... of] a passion for the land' (Graham 1981: 1–2). Nor is Aberdeen framed as a microcosm of the Scottish nation, positively or negatively, or even positioned in relation to other Scottish locations. It is a place of personal connection and recollection that reverberates across different times and locations. At the same time, while both novels contain detailed, lyrical descriptions of the city, it remains a place of memory, and one that can be at least partly disregarded. As Eleanor herself claims: 'Aberdeen? [...] There's not all that much to tell' (171).

If, as Edwards claims, network novels 'are centrally preoccupied with the workings of time' (Edwards 2019: 22), McGregor and Aboulela's novels remind us how the experience of time is almost always placed. Neither as focused on a specific Scottish place as Kay's and Keenan's works, or as ambiguous as Smith's and Kelman's, they instead emphasise how the memory and experience of different places is overlayed on top of each other. Aberdeen becomes a point of comparison to Khartoum and Coventry, highlighting the interconnection of different, apparently separate locales. Neither novel focuses significantly on questions of the nation or collective experience. While Aboulela is attentive to the legacies of Scottish colonialism, in neither novel does Aberdeen stand in for the nation as a whole, nor are they in any sense novels about Scotland. For Hames, the 'vernacular idiom of Scottishness' combines an emphasis on 'Scottish difference' with 'an aura of *populist-demotic inclusiveness*' (Hames 2020: 268). These elements are markedly absent from both novels: difference and inclusivity are at the level of the individual, and specific places, not the nation. This approach not only offers a way to think about Mahn's critique of 'additive' models – *River Sprit* is not adding a Sudanese perspective to a body of Scottish literature, but rather connecting Scottish and Sudanese histories to create something new – but also offers a way to think of representations of Scottish places that are not necessarily tied to authorial birthplace or residency. Aboulela is often approached in conversations about Scottish fiction, but more commonly British Muslim fiction; McGregor's work is not usually considered in discussions of Scottish Literature at all. Yet both writers illuminate aspects of Scottish, and particularly Northeast Scottish, experience. By interweaving

geographic and temporal nodes in their complicated historical networks, Aboulela and McGregor create a more inclusive framing that does not rest on an expansion of 'Scottishness', but moves past it. As Guyton writes of a later McGregor novel, 'the story *is* the community', where different characters and elements gain meaning by collective framing, 'regardless of any experiences they might be imagined to share or not share' (Guyton 2023). A reader does not have to know Aberdeen (or Khartoum, or Coventry) to appreciate these texts: rather, the discussion of these disparate places reveals the myriad connections between different locations outside of national borders and constitutional questions.

Case Study 3: Hidden Histories

By far the most common use of network form in contemporary Scottish fiction is to reimagine the past through non-linear or fragmented forms. Scottish historical network novels range from depictions of Jewish immigrant life in Scotland (Eleanor Thom's *Connective Tissue* [2023]) to interrogations of modernist aesthetics and marginalisation (Shola von Reinhold's *LOTE* [2020]) to multi-century narratives of a single place (Robertson's *News of the Dead* [2021]) to magical realist accounts of misogyny from authors both Scottish (Jenni Fagan's *Luckenbooth* [2021]) and based outwith Scotland (Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fayne* [2022]). The interweaving of multiple historical periods to illuminate excluded lives and identities and to shed new light on the present is one of the dominant modes of recent Scottish fiction; each of these novels, and many more, could be considered here. Linda Cracknell's *The Other Side of Stone* (2021) and Maggie O'Farrell's *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox* (2006) deserve particular consideration, however, for their combined emphasis on personal interconnections and the failure of networks to cohere. Cracknell's text is noteworthy for its focus on the relation between built and nonhuman environments; like Sarah Moss's *Summerwater* (2020), it offers an expansion of the idea of the network beyond human communication. O'Farrell's slightly more familiar novel stands in for popular fiction by a body of writers either born in Scotland but no longer living there (e.g. Moss, Margot Livesey) or born elsewhere but now living in Scotland (e.g. Kate Atkinson) who regularly use the techniques of the network novel to discuss both Scottish subjects and themes and material that is remote from any conception of Scottish literature. Putting these texts together reveals not only how network novels are used to challenge linear or progressive historical models, but how examining network novels as themselves components of a network offers an expansive view of the form and its emphasis on everyday life.

Cracknell's novel presents, in chapters that are specific to given years but not presented sequentially, the story of a mill in Perthshire from construction in 1831 to

ruin in 2019. From a contemporary perspective the mill 'seem[s] to embody a noble past' (Cracknell 2021: 97), while chapters of its earlier history chart its human cost, and protests against abuse. Cracknell's frequent use of anachrony emphasises the repetition of everyday suffering; George Kaye, who locks himself in the closed mill in 1990, thinks back to '[s]ome sort of strike-breaking [...] that left behind ashes and reek' and 'reminded him he wouldn't be the mill's first sacrifice' (41). In her quantitative account of long network novels, Lindsay Thomas stresses that network novels create a link between intimacy and repetition: network novels model 'a variety of intimacy that maps not onto the depth of connection but onto iteration: the repetition of proximity, [and] the return of trauma' (Thomas 2020: 663). Cracknell not only condenses this repetition into a brief text, but also includes a number of nonhuman actors; the book begins with a stone mason being watched by a small bird as he leaves his mark on the back of a stone, and ends with the stone being found, its back now visible again, as the site of the mill becomes an apple orchard. For Cracknell, exposure to the 'slightly blurred, only partially observed' natural world is a form of writing practice that highlights movement and change (Cracknell 2023: 19). The inclusion of these more-than-human elements, as in Moss's *Summerwater*, which is interspersed with brief accounts of animal life, illustrates not only the continuity of human trauma, but its contextualisation in a broader constellation of what Levine terms 'collective continuance' (Levine 2023: 41). Cracknell does not minimise the damage done to her human characters, but rather suggests that regrowth is always possible if human progress is measured in terms of engagement with the surrounding world, not simply industrialisation and capital.

O'Farrell's novel charts, in Mason's words, 'the ethereal or haunting nature of resemblances' (Mason 2019: 65); rather than illustrating repetition through occupation, as in Cracknell's text, the repetition here is of family characteristics: the novel interweaves the story of Iris Lockhart, in the present, and her great-aunt Esme Lennox, who has been kept in a psychiatric unit for decades and forgotten by her family. The shifts between timeframes and focalisers are not textually indicated, so that the reader often is not clear on when a particular section is taking place. The novel is further complicated by sections of unattributed dialogue, always beginning mid-sentence, which are initially difficult to interpret, but are revealed at the novel's end to be the voice of Esme's sister Kitty, who speaks 'without pause or reflection' (O'Farrell 2007: 268). The combination of voices allows O'Farrell to chart hidden histories and the legacy of abuse: rather than posing the novel's traumas as explanatory, they are interwoven into multiple narrations, so that the reader only gradually works them out. While the novel cannot be read as supporting McBean's claim that network fiction has been 'underexplored as a potentially queer aesthetic form' it does, as in McBean's

words, 'enact the kind of social labor via reading' that it textually represents in the novel itself: the recovery of traumatic histories is the work of both character and reader (McBean 2019: 449, 448). This work of recovery also potentially extends to considering the novel as a work of Scottish literature: although it is written by a novelist who lives in Edinburgh and is set there, it is approached by Mason as a work of Northern Irish fiction and elsewhere, in comparison with McGregor's work, as 'bleak and besieged Condition-of-England' novel (Porée and Guignery 2015: 132). O'Farrell certainly uses the same network techniques in novels set wholly in England; rather than insisting that *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox* deserves special consideration because of its more evident Scottishness, its positioning here reflects the futility of homogenous or essentialist national determinations.

This final ambiguity is central to both Cracknell's and O'Farrell's novels: as with the earlier texts described, they end not with resolution but a sense of continuance. Cracknell's novel ends with new forms of labour, if also increased attention to the nonhuman world, while O'Farrell's ends with Lennox's hospitalisation, the rest of the chronological story still to come. Both novels suggest the importance of examining interpersonal connections within a larger framework of perseverance and continuity.

Conclusion

Each of the novels mentioned above deserves more consideration. There are likewise many texts from other genres, whether crime (e.g. Denise Mina), science fiction (e.g. Martin MacInnes), or more experimental forms (e.g. Andrew Crumey) that lend themselves equally well to network analysis. The merit of combining these texts, both canonical and less-heralded, and those focusing on Scotland and to which Scottishness is wholly alien, is that they not only demonstrate the prominence of network forms in contemporary Scottish fiction, but illustrate the potential of regarding contemporary Scottish fiction as a network. Placing novels such as these in conjunction both demonstrates the diversity of contemporary Scottish fiction, as many critics have noted, but avoids the pitfalls of assuming the existence of an essential core of texts or themes to which new work is then added. Likewise, the focus of network novels on repetition and the everyday offers the opportunity to look at Scottish fiction not in terms of what it is about, but what it does. Each of these novels, in different ways, asks something of the reader: establishing both the connections between different narrative strands and between these texts and other works requires the active involvement of the reader, and opens the possibility for an engaged mode of reading that illuminates other forms of personal experience. Even if this is not the case, however, reading novels such as these in conjunction, as nodes of a larger network, offers possibilities for not

only thinking past essentialist narratives of a cohesive national literary tradition, but avoiding implicitly hierarchical evaluative methods. These texts call attention to the complexities of place and memory: in their troubling of sequence and causality, they suggest the extent to which contemporary fiction can challenge received histories and notions of identity.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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