

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### WHAT MATTERS NOW?

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Review of Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010.

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* has almost immediately come to be considered a necessary intervention in political ontology and political ecology. This is not surprising, as the playful vibrancy of the text, which repeats the vibrancy of its ontology, is quite timely. Adopting a recently popular orientation to objects, or, as Bennett prefers, things, propositioning a Deleuzian inspired political ontology articulated with a Latourian inspired political ecology, a coupling that is stitched together by eccentric readings of classical philosophical texts and classical readings of eccentric philosophical texts, and finding inspiration in early 20<sup>th</sup> century vitalisms, *Vibrant Matter* attempts two projects: a philosophical project—to think matter slowly, to think it so slowly that it becomes strange, and strangely vibrant—and a political project—“most ambitiously,” to make possible “more intelligent and sustainable engagements” with this vibrant matter (viii). The philosophical project—to make matter strange—is, Bennett suggests, to subject matter to an en-chanting repetition,<sup>1</sup> dissolving it into a strangeness that opens it up to a vibratory tension, a tension that is, at the same time, the opening of humanity to its implication in and by a vibrant materiality. There is a mutuality to this strange and vibrant matter: matter will become strangely vibrant only when humans become strangely matterial. The political project is, then, an articulation of this mutuality, bringing humanities tensed relationality with and within vibrant matter to a political pitch, learning to recognize its own implication in the tensions of matter, and,

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1. In *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Bennett proposes a theoretical elaboration of this practice of repetitive enchantment. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, especially 33-40.

more importantly, matter's implication in humanities tense political affairs. If there is a singular achievement to *Vibrant Matter* it is the articulation of this mutual implication, what Bennett refers to as a distributive horizontalization of ontology, agency, and politics (10, 32-33). Yet the non-hierarchical horizontalization that Bennett proposes should be confused with a flat ontology; even against her own reliance on a Deleuzean inspired ontology of planes and surfaces, hers is a world of depth, thick with swarming matter (32). The intelligent and sustainable engagement she proposes, then, is an ability to sink into the rich vibrancy of material being.

The philosophical project, presented in the first five chapters of the work, is, in many ways, an elaboration of the post-secular ontology suggested in Bennett's earlier *The Enchantment of Modern Life*.<sup>2</sup> Recognizing that the modern tale of disenchantment is a silencing of both matter and religion, the "quasi-pagan" (12) and "neo-pagan" (118) ontology of enchantment proposed in *The Enchantment of Modern Life* attempts to hear matter speak by repeating religion. Yet like *Vibrant Matter's* repetition of matter, this a repetition that produces a strangeness, here a strange sounding religion, or at least a religion that sounds strange to Western ears: a religion that is absent faith and belief, as well as a divine creator to secure the proper order and working of this living matter (12). It is, in this, an attempted repetition of the religious life of matter without the closure of its presence.

*Vibrant Matter* repeats this post-secularity, beginning to determine the vibrancy of matter through a theological conceptualization of the absolute borrowed from Hent de Vries.<sup>3</sup> For Bennett, the absolute comes to designate an "'intangible and imponderable' recalcitrance" of things, their existence as an out-side to the human, a something that has been "*loosened off* and on the loose" (3). In this expansive sense that no longer simply refers to *the Absolute*, the absolute becomes a "some-thing that is not an object of knowledge, that is detached or radically free from representation, and thus no-thing at all. Nothing but the force or effectivity of the detachment, that is" (3). This something that is no-thing names the "moment of independence possessed by things," the moment of their being out-side the human, free of human conceptual and material capture, exerting their own force of affect on bodies, both human and non-human. The absolute comes to name that some-thing that matters outside of its human bearing, a coming to matter that is registered as a recalcitrance to the bearing and over-bearing of humanity.

Things are, for Bennett, recalcitrant, encountering human subjects as out-side conceptual determination. It is for this reason that she prefers 'things' over 'objects.' 'Objects' are *for* humans, already captured by human conceptualization. A thing is, rather, a pure effect prior to its capture as an object of human knowledge and being (2-3). As pure effect it is ab-solute, Wild (Thoreau), affective (Spinoza), containing within

2. In the Preface to *Vibrant Matter* Bennett acknowledges a certain repetition of *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, although she does not mention the repetition of this post-secular religion. See "Preface," xi—xii.

3. Hent de Vries, "Introduction: Before, Around, and Beyond the Theological-Political," in Hent de Vries & Lawrence E. Sullivan (eds.), *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2006.

itself but only as inter-action a power designated as thing-power. The opening chapter of *Vibrant Matter* offers a necessarily fragmentary (non)conceptualization of this thing-power through a series of brief analyses: a random collection of trash that has the power to become something else, in its random vibrancy becoming an opening to the some-thing else of an out-side; Kafka's protagonist spool of thread, Odradek, existing as ontologically multiple, presenting an indecipherable border between the human and non-human, subject and object; the deodand of old English law, a thing that is treated as agentic, distributing agency across a wider range of ontological types; the mineral composition of human bodies, forcing a recognition both of the complexity of all bodies and the mutual responsibility for material bodies; the nonidentity of things proposed by Adorno, a nonidentity that haunts all conceptualizations as the excess of an object. In each of these case studies of thing-power, Bennett attempts an articulation of the actuality of things, an actuality designated as both recalcitrant out-side and affect. This affectivity is itself the out-side, an out-side that humanity must itself enter and become if it is to recognize its own affective body as its own. If a vibrant materialism begins with the recognition of things, it quickly leads to the acknowledgement that the human body is also a thing, always already out-side itself.

To speak of things as ontologically fundamental in these ways will risk, Bennett fears, a certain stasis and individualism. A thing is, in a common sense, a brutally existing individual. So if she prefers *thing* rather than *object*, she also prefers *actant* rather than *thing* (21). Actant is, of course, a concept borrowed from Latour; Bennett glosses an actant as "a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (viii, emphasis in original). The shift from thing to actant is to shift the ontological emphasis away from sheer recalcitrance in the direction of agency, of effect and affect, in the direction of, as she argues, a Spinozistic *conatus*, a stubbornness to exist (22). Equally important for Bennett is the claim that actants never act alone (21). Echoing the allied ontology hinted at in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*,<sup>4</sup> Bennett now proposes with Deleuze that actants act within assemblages, "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts" (23). With this, agency becomes fully distributed: ontologically distributed among actants, human and non-human bodies acting together in a "non-totalizable sum"<sup>5</sup>; as well as distributed within an assemblage, so that any singular agency is already implicated in and by other agencies. In her own twist on Nietzsche, Bennett can claim that there is no single doer behind the deed, only a doing by a human and non-human assemblage (28).

The second, third, and fourth chapters of *Vibrant Matter* cash out this ontology of things, of actants and assemblages, by exploring the North America blackout of 2003 (ch. 2), disciplines of eating (ch. 3), and a life of metal (ch. 4). Within this ontology of vibrancy, the massive North America blackout of 2003 is seen to have arisen not

4. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, p. 38.

5. Patrick Hayden, "Gilles Deleuze and Naturalism: A Convergence with Ecological Theory and Politics," *Environmental Ethics* vol. 19, no. 2, 1997, pp. 185-204.

from any single cause, but from a swarm of actants: from the molecular structure of electricity and wires, the ‘decisions’ of the electrical grid’s mechanical infrastructure, and the multiple and multiplying effects of temperature, to human consumption and decision making, the motivation of corporate profit, and the activation of a political will. In a similar way, Bennett argues that diet can no longer be reduced to caloric intake. In a wonderful reading of Nietzsche and Thoreau on warrior diets and berry eating, food choices situated within larger practices of being in the world, so that the efficacy of food, for good health or bad, derives not simply from the chemical composition of food itself, but from the cultures of food production and consumption within which that food is digested. Finally, again turning to Deleuze, Bennett begins to explore the power of vibrancy through the concept of *a* life, “a vitality proper not to an individual but to ‘pure immanence,’ or that protean swarm that is not actual though it is real” (54). Here the ontology of vibrant matter fully becomes a materialism, a materialism of heterogeneity, of difference and differentiation, and of life, where matter is “figured as a vitality at work both inside and outside ourselves, and is a force to be reckoned with without being purposive in any strong sense” (62). With the introduction of this living matter, of matter alive, Bennett is finally able to articulate her own desire: love. At the heart of the philosophical project of *Vibrant Matter* is a heart of love, a love of matter (61).

At this point, with all the talk of living matter and the love of matter, many readers of the new materialism that Bennett is often considered a part of<sup>6</sup> will roll their eyes and begin their own chant: “It’s simply vitalism.” To avoid this enchanting reduction masquerading as critique, Bennett closes her philosophical project with a nuanced reading of the critical vitalists Driesch and Bergson. These critical vitalists, distinguished from “naïve” vitalists who posit as the source of life a spiritual force or soul, understand nature as more than a machine and in principle beyond calculation, even as they remain committed to scientific knowledge. It is this combination that contains their inspiration for Bennett: that they “remain *scientific* while acknowledging some *incalculability* to things” (63, emphasis in original). In what Bennett considers an advancement beyond their naïve counterparts, the critical vitalists also propose a depersonalization of this vital force, removing from it both the personalization of will and the aim of a determinate teleology. Nature becomes, through them, a vibrant, differentiating, heterogeneous movement. Even with this propositioning of a vital matter that is filled with life, Bennett ultimately finds these critical vitalisms lacking in one respect: “they stopped short,” “they could not imagine a *materialism* adequate to the vitality they discerned in natural processes” (63). In other words, the force of life that animated nature is figured as coming to matter from outside itself; matter itself is never figured as alive.

If the ontology of vibrant matter that Bennett proposes will ultimately move away from vitalism—critical or otherwise—the presentation of these various vitalisms offers its own political payoff in allowing a refiguring of the current debates over the “culture

6. Diana Coole & Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialism,” in Diana Coole & Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010, 1-29.

of life” and stem cell research. In a wonderful transition to her political project, Bennett argues that the culture wars over life and death are also contestations of various vitalisms, so that the “culture of life” ought to be seen as a theological soul vitalism (87). The culture wars, then, are not contestations of the secular and the religious, but of old, soul vitalisms and critical vitalisms (90). If this is a wonderful reading of the culture wars, it also shows up a dangerous lack in the analytic of vitalisms, and maybe of vibrant matter more generally, which is unable to offer finer distinctions than that between a personalized soul vitalism and a de-personalized critical vitalism, each measured only by the degrees of life or differentiation that they offer. Here Bennett must draw, without acknowledgment, from eco-feminist theologians who have been arguing for decades that this theological vitalism is itself animated by a theological hierarchy, with humans occupying a privileged place. With this unacknowledged debt to eco-feminist theology, Bennett is able to offer a wonderful articulation of the consistency of a “culture of life” that also believes in pre-emptive war and violent nation building as a theological vitalism: just as the human body is alive and sacred once it is implanted with a divine spirit or soul, cultures and nations must become enlivened by a divinely justified implantation of freedom (84). With this, the “culture of life” comes to be seen as more than just a theologically determined ideology; it is, rather, a political practice of vitalism that arises as a combination of theological belief and scientific practice, taking on an aesthetics of war, as well as practices of nations and empires (88).

This transition through vitalisms scientific, philosophical, and political marks the passage to the politics of vibrant matter. In the seventh chapter, “Political Ecologies,” Bennett addresses the question of the political directly: how can a vibrant matter, filled with actants and assemblages, human and non-human bodies, become political? To answer this question Bennett turns to the political theorizing of Dewey and Rancière. Although neither offers a political ecology adequate to vibrant matter, each remaining with an anthropocentric politics, they offer, in their own ways, openings to the politics Bennett wants to offer. Through Dewey Bennett is able to articulate a political system as being like an ecosystem, a public “confederation of bodies” brought together not by will but by the experience of a problem, acting within this problem by conjointly acting through mutually implicated political causes and effects (100-101). Although Dewey himself never articulates this politics of problems and publics as a post-humanism, Bennett argues that there is nothing to prevent this, so that, with a little nudge from Latour, Dewey can become a political theorist of ecology. Rancière is even less post-humanist and ecologically inclined than Dewey, and so at first glance a strange choice for the development of a vibrant material politics. But, as Bennett argues, the principle political act for Rancière is “the exclamatory interjection of affective bodies as they enter the public,” disrupting, through that exclamation, the order and ordering of the public (105). Although Rancière himself has no interest in extending this exclamatory activity beyond the human, there is again, Bennett argues, no reason this cannot be done. With this expansion it would become possible to determine the public of our political life as unruly activity, energy, an excess of bodies that is articulated only as and

through its effects (106-107), and the disruptions of this public as being enacted not only by human bodies but by any body that has the force and effect to insist itself into the public (106). Through these expansive readings of Dewey and Rancière, Bennett is able to propose her own politics, where actants act conjointly to form a public, not from will but as coalescing around problems, working out and through their own vibrancy (109).

Taking up the ontology of vibrant matter from the philosophical project and the politics hinted at by Dewey and Rancière, Bennett is able to propose her own political ecology. She begins by distancing the politics of vibrant matter from “environmentalism,” to the extent that environmentalism, she argues, determines nature as the passive object of human intervention. The politics of vibrant matter, vital materialism, will include nature as a subject of politics, where human and non-human bodies are recognized as political actants (112). This is to propose a politics that rests on an “ontological field without any unequivocal demarcations between human, animal, vegetable, or mineral. *All* forces and flows (materialities) are or can become lively, affective, and signaling” (117). This is, in other words, a politics of creativity, of activity, of becoming, filled with bodies that are congealed force, and agents that only function within this field of this congealing, creative force. It is, if not a culture of life, then a politics of life, that ends, in a final post-secular twist, with a newly proposed Nicene Creed for vital materialists: a creed of belief in matter and force, of heterogeneity and difference, of human and non-human bodies working together, and the transformative power of encounters with vibrant matter to broaden the scope of our political interests to include the salvation of the world.

Both philosophically and political this is a necessary and inspiring proposition. Bennett is right to recognize that any future that we are to have must begin with a reordering of our politics into a recognition of the ecological implication of humanity and nature, of human and non-human bodies; our future must be materialist in this sense. She also right in recognizing that this political reordering must itself arise with refiguring of our ontological world, one which overcomes the privileged binaries of subject-object, human-non-human. As we have seen, Bennett clearly sides with objects as this overcoming. To this end, one of the founding gestures of her project is announced in the Introduction as an “eliding” of the “rich and diverse literature on subjectivity and its genesis” (ix). There are certainly good reasons for this, but in eliding the discourse on subjectivity Bennett also abandons the rich and diverse analysis of power that has been a part of that discourse. Again, there may be very good reasons for wanting to move beyond power for political analysis, but in moving beyond power politics still requires an analytic of becoming, one that can account for, as Rancière might say, the distribution of *what* matters, of what comes to matter. The political public must be more than a field of feeling, of becoming, even if that is an expansive feeling and becoming of the world, of the human and non-human alike. A politics of the future which is a sustainable politics must account not only for the force of life, of the vibrancy of matter, but the force of the negative as well, the forces that demarcate the field of becoming into the possible and impossible, determining what matter can come to matter. Although vibrant materialism

is a necessary step in developing a political ecology of this sustainable future, it remains to be supplemented by a something that will allow us to intervene in the becoming of what matters.