

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

Queens College

2011

Review of the book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*

Karen Weingarten
CUNY Queens College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/qc_pubs/146

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, 200 pp. \$74.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

A pile of trash, a scrap of metal, an overtaxed energy grid, hungry worms, and embryonic stem cells: these are just some of the main characters in Jane Bennett's short though ambitious work that lays out her theory of vital materiality. While at first glance, a book combining such subjects might appear to be apolitical, Bennett's work, and particularly her first chapter, makes clear the deeply political stakes of her project. This is a book that seeks to complicate the terms "life" and "matter," but even more importantly, it seeks to define a politics—one that Bennett calls "vital materiality"—which questions the distinction that is at the heart of the American system: namely, that human beings are the supreme and most important life form. Ultimately, underlying her political philosophy is that if—as humans—we accept on a political level that all things—living and not—are in Gilles Deleuze's words "ontologically one, formally diverse," then, according to Bennett, "human decency and a decent politics" would emerge (p. xi).

Despite appearances that *Vibrant Matter* continues the posthumanist tradition, Bennett insists that at the heart of her concern is human interest. She explains in her introduction: "My claims here are motivated by a self-interested or conative concern for *human* survival and happiness: I want to promote greener forms of human culture and more attentive encounters between people-materialities and thing-materialities" (p. ix; emphasis in original). In other words, and as she emphasizes in her concluding chapter, we should be motivated to adopt a vital materialist politics that no longer privileges humans—or any living forms—over seemingly inanimate matter, because ultimately such a politics will make our human lives better. While Bennett may be critiqued for admitting that at the end, the qualitative life of human beings is most important to her, she seems to readily admit throughout her work that to be human is to be unable to escape being human. Therefore, while at the heart of her argument is a posthumanist claim that de-privileges humanity as the center through which all political systems must be understood, Bennett concludes—with much nuance—that as human beings, we cannot help but center ourselves, even if we claim to do otherwise.

As part of her methodology in constructing vital materialism, she wants to emphasize that poststructuralist thought—from Foucault to Deleuze to Derrida and even to Thoreau—contains a theory of materialism, even if it is not one that traditional Marxists might recognize. However, she distinguishes between the materialism she pursues and what she calls "historical materialism" as the difference between a resistance to anthropocentrism and a reliance on the human as the center. (Whether Marx would agree with her interpretation is another story.) Her goal is to give voice to the moment when things detach from bodies into the absolute. Her project, as she explicitly emphasizes, is importantly ontological, but not epistemological. In other words, she wants to point us to the places where things are and have force, and to give language to those places so that we can see and perhaps even feel the force of (their) motion. By doing so, she begins the work of erasing the distinctions that are often drawn between living and nonliving things. As she explains: "One moral of the story is that we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world" (p. 4).

Key to her critique is the labeling of American materialism as "antimaterialism"; in other words, she suggests that as the life cycles of things we purchase have become shorter and shorter, we are now driven by an economy that privileges throwing things away to make room for new things. Yet in this pile of dis-

carded American trash, she does not identify waste, but what she labels “thing-power,” or “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (p. 6). Trash, in her political ecology, is made alive and—in reverse and more dramatically perhaps—she argues that life itself, including human life, is invested and part of thing-power, including trash. In other words, we ourselves are made of things. (In order to see this perspective, she suggests that we look at evolutionary, rather than biological, time.) She quotes Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky, a nineteenth-century Russian scientist, to emphasize this point: “*We are walking, talking minerals*” (p. 11; emphasis in original). At the same time, she acknowledges the concern that if humans and things are viewed horizontally, then some forms of human life might even be more reduced to mere objects and treated poorly as such.

Yet drawing on her theory of vital materialism, she proposes another solution: “*to raise the status of the materiality of which we are composed*” (p. 12; emphasis in original). Her political project again crystallizes here as she projects that through this perspective, bodies made up of materialities outside the norm would still be accepted merely because *all* materiality in this system is respected. Thing-power, as she argues, “draws attention to an efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve” (p. 20). This mode of thinking challenges the “life-matter binary” that she calls “the dominant organizational principle of adult experience” (*ibid.*), which is one that children, in their firm belief that inanimate things can come alive, intuitively reject.

Ultimately, Bennett wants to theorize a materiality that is both force and entity, energy and matter. She also wants to construct a theory of thing-power as something that has relationality—that happens not individually, but because of the combination of actants. So, for example, “particular fats, acting in different ways in different bodies, and with different intensities even within the same body at different times, may produce patterns of effects, though not in ways that are fully predictable” (p. 41). These fats, which are made up of elements that are conventionally viewed as inanimate, have as much impact—or “force,” to use Bennett’s term—in the making of our material world as the cellular and living material that we consider the building blocks of life.

In drawing on these arguments, one of her more fascinating chapters focuses on the American pro-life movement. She coins the term “latter-day vitalism” to describe this movement, because it echoes claims by Kant, Driesch, and Bergson that “there exists a vital force inside the biological organism that is irreducible to matter because it is a free and undetermined agency” (p. 83). Yet she also takes care to distinguish contemporary vitalism emerging from Christian evangelism from the vitalism of Kant, Driesch, and Bergson, who insisted on rejecting a “vitalism of the soul” (*ibid.*). These material vitalists understood that a world organized according to a hierarchical logic of “God-Man-Nature,” where the human soul is relegated to a privileged place among both living and nonliving beings, readily gives way to other violent-producing hierarchies along such categories as race, class, culture, and the one that Bennett, as well as her vitalist predecessors, less readily acknowledge—gender. “Soul vitalists,” as she calls pro-lifers, believe that the vital force is personally and individually endowed by a higher power, while for Driesch and Bergson the vital force is moved by an impersonal agency.

Key to this distinction, Bennett asserts, is that soul vitalists believe that just as not all matter is created equal, not all souls are created equal. Therefore those “strong” souls must protect the weak, and a paternalistic ethics of care emerges, which, she argues, “is conjoined to a doctrine of vital war and to other manifes-

tations of a not-so-hidden attraction to violence, such as the ardent defense of torture, guns, and all things military" (p. 88). This is her insightful explanation for how someone could be both pro-life and pro-war.

But there is also a feminist dimension to her argument that she does not address; extending her logic also explains how anti-abortion activists could so quickly devalue the life of the woman carrying an unwanted fetus, and even the life of an unwanted child after it is born. The question that arises out of this connection—"Is there something intrinsic to vitalism, to faith in the autonomy of life, that allies itself with violence?" (p. 89)—becomes one of the key political contributions of her work. She answers with a resounding "no" and provides Driesch's work as an example of someone who was both a vitalist and a pacifist.

She ends by optimistically asserting that "encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests" (p. 122). This is a happy note to leave us on; the question—and it is one she raises—is whether those of us interested in political projects that seek to de-privilege humanity can once again re-appropriate vitalism and decouple it from its recent tendencies toward violence.

Karen Weingarten
Queens College, City University of New York