

ALIENOCENE – THEORY/FICTION

# OTHERING ECOLOGY\_\_\_\_\_



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NICOLE GRIMALDI

## Jane Bennett's influential text *Vibrant Matter*

proposes a radical political ecology that encourages us to attend to matter, to “thingly power,” not as an inert or passive backdrop against which human activity is set, but as vested with lively intensities and productive forces that both inform and elude us. Bennett positions her work as pursuing a materialist axis following Democritus, Epicurus, and Spinoza—one which understands matter as expressive, participatory, recalcitrant, and capable of commanding human attention by way of its own generative propensities. In the process, Bennett challenges received conceptions regarding the ontological primacy of humans and works to de-partition traditional onto-theological binaries (life/matter, human/animal, organic/inorganic). While she concedes that analyses of power relations operative in the human realm are important for exposing social hegemony and unravelling political inequality across human subjects, her account suggests we “bracket the question of the human” and ask whether expanding our political arena to include matter and nonhuman things after their long tenure of exile from the fora of human affairs can meaningfully redirect our political responses to ecological crises in particular (ix).

The political status and stakes of Bennett's vital materiality are debateable. On the one hand, the investment in thing-power is an ontologically diversifying perspective that succeeds in encouraging us to attend more meaningfully to non-human forces. However, by investing in the power of matter-in-itself, new materialist discourses like Bennett's often signal a problematic disinvestment from the study of social power relations that constrain and animate human life, and which remain pressingly determinative and unresolved in the realm of the human. This skepticism is well-documented in the scholarly

response to new materialism. Do ontologies that decenter the fraught histories of the subject overlook or disregard the materiality of race and gender in particular? Do they fail to negotiate visions of human praxis that are inclusive of social and historical dimensionalities to their detriment, especially those coming out of feminist, queer, and queer of color critique? There is also the fact that Bennett does not engage long-standing Indigenous philosophies to which some “new” materialisms bear considerable resemblance. And as we will see, even while self-situating her project within a particular western philosophical tradition, her conclusions under-negotiate potential criticisms that can be mounted from within that very paradigm—whether the insistence on relational profusion suppresses the question of difference and renders generic and generalized the human gaze, for instance, or the implicit assumption that such a new materialist approach, in impressing upon material immediacy, can correct or circumvent problems that reside at the level of language and representation.

One available response is to say that it is not clear that an expressly “thing”-centered project should be critiqued for its failure to treat the subject-oriented dimensions of contemporary politics in a complete or exhaustive manner. Perhaps it violates the terms of Bennett’s text to assess it on the basis of what escapes its purview—by reintroducing questions of race, gender, and Indigeneity, for instance, which Bennett’s account consciously sets aside in favor of a matter-attentive materialism. However, the presumption that we are only authorized to question a text on its own terms rather than impose our particular demands on it—what Alfred J. López calls proceeding by way of a “dialectics of permission”—may well continue to stunt the growth of new materialist work like Bennett’s, especially when such tensions have proven productive, helping to open up and meaningfully redirect future research in the field.<sup>1</sup> In addition to asking what is left out of such discourses, one should ask what they impart or import—whether most new materialisms (in their ontological protraction that lumps human beings in with a wider array of active materiality) spring out of a sort of theoretical luxury (inevitably connected

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<sup>1</sup> López, Alfred J. “Contesting the Material Turn; or, the Persistence of Agency.” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 5(3), September 2018, pp. 372.

to comforts not-merely-theoretical) or else out of a brand of relational utopianism whereby humans are “at bottom” more materially and relationally akin than divergent and thus can be called to redirect their unitary attention to nonhuman materials. Without exercising blanket disapprobation here and understanding that theoretical projects do not always align due to deviating stakes and incentives that veer into unsquareable territory (such as the commitment to a de- or pre-socialized metaphysics versus the belief in its impossibility), it is worth considering what set of idyllic investments or intellectual pacifisms are required to look over an empirical history of antagonism in order to seize upon the project of radicalizing ontology by deference to things, as though it is a more critical or foundational project than thinking through what Jordy Rosenberg calls “the dynamics of social mediation” at the level of the human—“the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class [that] constitute social formations within liberal capitalism.”<sup>2</sup> Herein lies a rub that continues to disclose itself in the contemporary theoretical literature in the humanities, to be sure, and beyond. Whether or not a case can be made for their reconciliation, the division between anthropocentric and non- or post-anthropocentric methods of approach remains a focal and contentious problem.

Bennett’s philosophy does not consider the empirical or material subject-positions and conditions that make a philosophy such as hers entertainable for some and unthinkable for others from the outset. While to adopt the approach advocated in *Vibrant Matter* is to presume that one can rewrite ontology after centuries of experiencing subjective embodiment in disproportionate and historically-laden ways, this is naturally not the case for all theorists working in a neo-materialist vein. Rosi Braidotti’s neo-materialist posthumanism, for instance, balances a critique of anthropocentrism with a critical response to the afterlives of humanism as informed by anti-colonial and feminist discourses, keeping abreast the importance of incorporating “situated epistemologies” after Haraway.<sup>3</sup> And Mel Y. Chen writes questions of race and queerness into their

<sup>2</sup> Rosenberg, Jordana. “The Molecularization of Sexuality: On Some Primitivisms of the Present.” *Theory & Event*, 17(2), 2014.

<sup>3</sup> See Braidotti, Rosi. *Posthuman Knowledge*. New York: Polity Press, 2019.

materialist premises from the outset, rather than appealing to pre-socialized ontological categories.<sup>4</sup> Against pre- or de-socialized ontology, we might think also of Denise Ferreira da Silva's work, which takes as given what I suggest later: that many ontological accounts fail to recognize the way epistemological presumption saturates so-called primary or formal categories, thereby disrupting the possibility of positing a flat, non-hierarchical, evacuated formalism, a primary "fundamental" ontology through which we can think relationality, posture, agency, or forms of being irrespective of historically-inflected, enfleshed subjectivities. Da Silva points out the "impossibility of separating ontology and epistemology in modern thought," implicitly casting doubt on the projects mounted by Bennett as well as speculative realist philosophies like OOO. Fred Moten's counterhegemonic social conception of ontology has also been seen to function as a remedy to the exclusions that shape the ontological and material turns evinced by Bennett and others.<sup>5</sup> Such discourses suggest that perhaps everything is artifact, including our so-called constitutive or antecedent metaphysical categories. Important philosophical and political questions arise from these considerations. To what extent is an interventionist metaphysics possible? Or: is there such a thing as a "new" metaphysics that can neglect or circumvent a treatment of its own social, political, or historical coming-to-be?<sup>6</sup>

While a number of new materialist discourses need to respond thoughtfully to these many interventions, my aim here will be to meet Bennett's vital materialism where it is (even if that means I subscribe in this instance to the *dialectics of permission* López is wary of) and to ask whether such a position cashes out on the distinct ontological grounds it sets out from. If we are as generous as Bennett often is in her response to proponents and critics of vibrant materiality alike, and we assume that the socio-political stakes of her project in *Vibrant Matter* are robust and meaningful, what should an ontology inclusive of nonhuman species and matter look like? I will argue that even before questions concerning whether Bennett's vital materialism can effectively treat what some strains of new

<sup>4</sup> Chen, Mel Y. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> See Rosenberg, Jordana. "The Molecularization of Sexuality: On Some Primitivisms of the Present." *Theory & Event*, 17(2), 2014.

<sup>6</sup> See Harman, Graham and Latour, Bruno, eds. "New Metaphysics" Series. *Open Humanities Press*, 2011-2020.

materialist study neglect—such as those queries coming out of queer theory, critical race theory, feminist analyses, bio/necropolitics, historical materialist tracts, and so on—there are questions concerning method, epistemological allegiances, and philosophical presumption at play in Bennett that compromise from the start the overarching thrust of her project (to highlight the “nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies” [ix]).

I will examine 1) how Bennett’s terminological shift from “objects” to “things” is not reflected at the level of her political ecology beyond an insistence on the latter over the former, and 2) how Bennett’s plan to “bracket the human” in favor of a vibrant materialist analysis is performed through the reintroduction of a universalized human subject—a projective and organizing consciousness—that operates “ontologically” via pre-proposed epistemological affinities (2, viii). I suggest that Bennett’s account is not radical enough in leaving a place for alterity in the spheres of the non-human or material, and therefore that her account does not philosophically invest in the unknowable power of things that it celebrates. Throughout, I argue for why a radical alterity must be central to an ecological, vitalist, or object-oriented ontology, in order that these discourses do not effectively reinstall the appropriative human ecologies, terminologies, and epistemologies they aim to displace.

### From “Objects” to “Things”

Bennett’s terminological shift from *objects* as described by W.J.T. Mitchell (“the way things appear to a subject”) to *things* (taken from Foucault’s metaphysics of the object—“a metaphysics of that never objectifiable depth from which objects rise up”) is meant to illuminate the pivot made by her political ecology as a whole (2). And yet, *Vibrant Matter* does not get away from observing things in the style of the object as defined above. Bennett advocates for an approach to matter as “a culture of things irreducible to the

culture of objects,” even while she negotiates the culture of things through object-culture (things as viewed, arranged, and affectively defined by a mediative subject) (5).

In the first chapter of *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett supplements for the brand of realism that insists on matter’s recalcitrance, and deviates from what Meillassoux calls “correlationism”<sup>7</sup> by suggesting that matter does not merely persist in resisting human manipulations but also displays a vital force that includes the ability to initiate or produce effects. In developing her concept of thing-power, Bennett merges the Spinozist conatus, the Thoreauan “Wild,” and Hent de Vries’s “absolute” into one critical nexus.

While Spinoza thinks much less of the capacity of animals and things to wield power as compared with human reason’s self-perfecting, deeply affective, and more powerfully modifying nature, he does grant (after Aristotle) that “any thing whatsoever” strives, in the aim to preserve its own being.<sup>8</sup> Bennett here hopes to illustrate how human- and/as thing-bodies “form alliances and enter assemblages” and sees this agency as “distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field”; bodies interact in ways congregative, rather than hierarchically or as the product of human effort (22-3).<sup>9</sup> The Thoreauan Wild is described as “an uncanny presence... a not-quite-human force that addle[s] and alter[s] human and other bodies... an irreducibly strange dimension of matter, an outside” (3). The “absolute” of de Vries refers to “an intangible and imponderable recalcitrance” that resists representation and refuses to be dissolved by human knowledge (3). Respectively, these three elements of thing-power serve to 1) dissolve into an equivalence the differently expressed but similarly striving conative power of both human and non-human entities, 2) establish the agential action of things on other things as well as on the world of the human,

<sup>7</sup> See Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude*. New York: Continuum, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Benedict de Spinoza. “Part III: On the Origin and Nature of the Emotions.” *Ethics*. Edwin Curley, trans. London: Penguin, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Bennett does say that her monism is, after Deleuze, “ontologically one, formally diverse.” She argues that all things exhibit a natural tendency to strive and so sees what she calls “variable” materialities as ontologically one with respect to the broadly distributed power across all things even as they “morph, evolve, disintegrate” (VM xi). In this case things are not, for her “strangely strange all the way down” as they are for object-oriented ontologists like Timothy Morton; they are all equally “striving” at bottom (Morton, Timothy. “Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology.” *Qui Parle*, 19(2), Spring/Summer, 2011, p. 184).

and 3) foreclose the human capacity to wholly know the non-representable uncanniness of things (an exercise in epistemological modesty).

The catch is that such an insistence on the obdurate unknowability of things would not provide Bennett sufficient grounds to evaluate or observe with any authority the operations of those things—an activity her text is very much invested in. Bennett's move is thus to restrain the "absolute," scaling it down to a "vibrant matter," which bakes thing-wildness into a much more ontologically-accessible pie. She calls de Vries's abeyance to an epistemological limit an anthropocentric impulse and reproaches de Vries for "overlook[ing] things and what they can do," when he is in fact resisting that we can know in any complete way what things do even if we hoped to look (3). Keeping abreast a de Vriesean investment in the absolute would not necessarily entail the decimation of thing-power, but it would radicalize its inaccessibility, and thereby compromise the possibility for a robust account of its activity. Thus, Bennett makes more modest thing-power's autonomous thinglyness, since acknowledging the utterly-ungraspable, noumenal, or radical dehiscence of things would ultimately complicate her account (she would be forced to tarry with the fact of philosophical foreclosure rather than project imaginatively by way of "speculative onto-stor[ies]" [4]). Unfortunately, this modification permits her to hyper-anthropomorphize in the aim of evading anthropocentric self-concern. Bennett's purported movement from epistemology to that of ontology is thus an effort that relies on opening back up the epistemological possibilities that "the absolute" foreclosed. Having cleared the ground for speculative operations, the bulk of her book goes on to describe matter's intrinsic vitality—a practice that revolves around thing-power as framed by human affect, experiences, and voicings of these objects, as seen through the lens of what things provoke and promote for the arguably still-centralized human "I" (3). Bennett's philosophy thus tries to have it both ways with respect to its onto-epistemological foregrounding—it postulates epistemological impossibility as well as a categorized, anthropocentric metaphysics to frame and delineate that impossibility.

## The Universalized Human Gaze

Tracking with still-active trends in postcritique, Bennett is wary of the hermeneutics of suspicion and its attachment to processes of demystification. Her resistance to demystification is not a wholesale condemnation of demystification as a critical tool, but the fact that it proves to be useful only when we seek to uncover the traces and projections of human agency. It is a human tool that uncovers human motivations and manipulations by way of captious critique, and is thus not of use if what we hope to uncover is the affirmative autonomy of thing-power. Bennett thus claims to jettison a demystifying impulse, which she sees as predominantly afoot in human projects that work to disclose the operations of hegemony—approaches that “screen from view the vitality of matter and reduce political agency to human agency” (xvi). And yet, she similarly exhibits a demystifying gesture by imputing (or “finding”) a shared conatic striving across humans and things, arguably reducing thing-power to one type of familiar power, demystifying and disclosing its formal essence.

Bennett’s descriptions of thing-power’s ability “to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness” are drawn from the human experience of that independence, delightfully recounted. She describes things as having “protean agency,” as being “resistan[t],” as “rich,” and “complex”—delivering things with haste back to their status as objects as they appear for us (13, 11). Nowhere is this plainer than in her appraisal of a thing-assemblage encountered in a storm drain grate to Chesapeake Bay:

“Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick... stuff to ignore,... and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects. In the second moment, *stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call*, even if I did not quite understand what it was saying. At the very least, *it provoked affects in me*: I was repelled by the dead (or was it merely sleeping?) rat and dismayed by the litter, but *I also felt*

*something else*: a nameless awareness of the impossible singularity of that rat, that configuration of pollen... the 'excruciating complexity and intractability' of nonhuman bodies, but, in being struck, *I realized* that the capacity of these bodies was not restricted to a passive 'intractability' but also included the ability to make things happen, to produce effects. When the materiality of the glove, the rat, the pollen, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and spark, it was in part because of the contingent tableau that they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather that morning, with me... and so *I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things*, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics. *In my encounter with the gutter on Cold Spring Lane, I glimpsed a culture of things* irreducible to the culture of objects" (4-5, emphases mine).

Here the independence of things relies on a formulating human consciousness to configure its autonomy. If we take Bennett at her word and think thing-power while we "bracket the human," who or what in this excerpt is experiencing these objects as such (as energetically vital, "vivid," "disclosing themselves as dead" while nonetheless "alive")? We still have the classifying human being in full swing, needed to insist upon the objective vibrancy of rats and gloves. The human is not bracketed except with respect to its history, its differentiations, its varied investments. The de-situated human consciousness is universalized, sublimated into an objective gaze in order to decree that thingness is inarguably invested with power, vitality, accessible-inaccessibility. In the process, matter is never granted real autonomy but remains shackled to human faculties and relegated to the fatalism of address.

Bennett's onto-story's choice of a particular road, a particular street in Baltimore (which is named only to aesthetically localize the quotidian encounter, not to socially contextualize the sightings) abstracts away from the sociological factors that might be relevant to how different subjects would attend to those objects and in all likelihood derive divergent meanings from them. López notes that the items Bennett celebrates may well appear as less vital, intractable, and disclosing if viewed by a subject harboring a different

perspective, a different affective propulsion, “an-Other gaze” (377). Bennett’s characterization of matter succeeds in both universalizing a particular gaze (presumably a white, middle/upper class, academic gaze) while abstracting away from contextual factors that might account for or alter it. The lack of attunement to socio-political systems of power through which things appear and through which subjects are differentiated forecloses rich and diverse readings of that same assemblage while popularizing the notion that what is gleaned by one observer exposes in full the vibrant truth of things.

You will notice that my critique so far has been vacillating between two strains. The first strain goes as follows: to make a claim about matter not just as vibrant but as experienceable, perceivable, and legible as such is to introduce not just an agential human but an affected, experientially-modified one. This means one must thereby account for the discrepancies across human subjects. The universalized gaze imported, at this level, entails that subjects are not treated in their variability (which is ironic as matter is read as highly variable, creating an imbalance across acting entities).

This critique of Bennett tracks alongside discourses concerned with the state of the subject as a highly variable and unstable category—those that insist we treat subjects in their constellative and differential materialities, and, crucially, in their disproportionate agential power. Alexander Weheliye in *Habeas Viscus*, for instance, cautions that we remain suspicious of the “disavowal of subjectivity in theoretical discourse,” which often encodes a desire to transcend particular critical categories, like race, to which we can add other critical categories—such as gender, class, sexual identity, etc. (48).<sup>10</sup> If Bennett disavowed an investment in the subject outright, it might be more possible to read her charitably as not invested in subject discourses and so less susceptible to critiques at this level. However, such critiques can be made from *within* Bennett’s materialist ontology, as she herself reinstalls a subject-centered narrative in order to decipher matter’s qualities and volitions. Bennett argues that discerning and attending to the mattering of the mattered world over constructivist ontologies of the human and its correlative, nonhuman

<sup>10</sup> Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Others involves an active attempt to “elide the question of the human” (120).<sup>11</sup> But the argument of the text as a whole relies on this human subject as the unit through which the text’s concerns are focalized. And yet, this subject is a bare and unconvincing one—one uninflected by difference, universalized in its engagement with materiality, reliably motivated, already-invested in a vision of materiality as vibrant and active and necessarily worthy of our attention.<sup>12</sup>

The second strain of critique goes as follows: the belief in thing-power beyond human reach is a modest view that is only supportable if Bennett had resisted the urge to populate and characterize this unknowability. This is where I think Bennett requires an abeyance to a type of radical alterity<sup>13</sup> or unknowability to properly preserve the autonomy of thing-power. We have thus taken issue with Bennett’s imputation of a particular subject as the general subject, as well as with her ontological concession to the unknowability of matter that then is named and demystified through the flexings of epistemological presumption.

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<sup>11</sup> López notes that the connection between the neglect of matter as “dead” or “inert” and the historical treatment of human Others as “things” viable for human exploitation is overlooked by Bennett, even as it contains the seeds of what might be a crucial overlap between vibrant materialism and critical race and gender theory. Weheliye opens the door for a brand of new materialism, argues López, which incorporates subjects as defined by racialized assemblages, and that keeps abreast a history while offering a more expansive vision of affect that incorporates one’s feeling of race (384). This is a view of enfleshed immersion (drawn from Wynter and Spillers) that, if materialist, is not *merely* materialist, and is certainly not materialist in the way a number of new materialisms are that advocate for desocialized ontologies. In any case, we see the way that reading against new materialist discourses can forge a direction for sympathizers of new materialisms like Bennett’s who are troubled by its omissions, which may well propel novel future queries borne out of (amended) new materialist allegiances.

<sup>12</sup> In trying to departition humanist binaries and leave aside the question of the human, Bennett reinstalls a monolithic human subject, so sabotaging any anti-humanist theoretical effort on her part. By contrast, anthropocentric anti-humanist discourses (especially those out of black studies) similarly work against humanist myths of rational Man’s enlightened domination by way of an explicit critique of the humanist human and the reimagining of human futures. See Wynter, da Silva, Weheliye.

<sup>13</sup> Alterity is a term freighted with the residues of a long western philosophical tradition (and perhaps should be replaced with new terminologies or articulations, as Jack Halberstam suggests [see *Posthuman Glossary*, Maria Hlavajova and Rosi Braidotti, eds. London: Bloomsbury, 2018, pp. 171]). For the moment, alterity in my sense is not poised to insist upon or reinforce the human/nonhuman divide but rather radicalizes, with an eye to ethical engagement, unknowability—our restricted epistemological access to others and things, regardless of their human or non-human status, such that we do not populate with projection that to which we have incomplete knowledge—it is, in essence, a Kantian restraint of sorts, but one applied not only to a particular, over-reaching species but one that perforates all engagement, even inter-human arrangements, while not rendering impossible interaction or relation.

### The Absolute Alterity of the Neighbor

Bennett in some ways anticipates our critique by acknowledging the danger of describing thing-power such that the independence of objects might be lost and wonders what methodology is capable of such a task. She suggests at least two antidotes. One is to accept that philosophy has at least as much to do with play as with reason and to embrace what Adorno called our “clownish traits”—to approach matter knowing that we will never have complete access to it, that it is beyond the sphere of our control, but to engage it anyway and be willing “to appear naïve or foolish” before it. The negative dialectician knows he cannot experience non-identity, “and yet he must always talk as if he had it entirely” to better entertain speculative engagements with it, to engage that non-identity by way of a sort of *doltish dialectic* (15). Another way, which is in some ways an extension or recasting of the first, is to forsake a dogged anthropocentrism while seeing one’s anthropomorphic tendencies as a potential aid to help rethink matter as both recalcitrant and empowered: “We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” (xvi). Leaving aside that the first of these licenses the human narcissism that the second subverts, and leaving aside that humans are “in charge of the world” to varying degrees (here is an instance of the universalized human we have discussed), there is also something very compelling about this claim. Because we cannot experience anything except as humans, we cannot extend a sense of autonomy or agency to matter unless we presuppose that its autonomy or agency looks and feels something like our own. This may be our only (problematic) way of affirming thing-power. However, does this willful anthropomorphism “catalyze a sensibility” that means we see the world as filled with complex and entangled materiality rather than ontologically distinct categories of beings, as Bennett suggests, or does it get us to a world where one brand of human

agency perforates all nonhuman life, overwriting even the possibility of inaccessible matter and reinstalling a vision of the world-as-all-legible to human actants?

Bennett hopes in *Vibrant Matter* to “follow Derrida,” and by extension to follow the nonhuman (the animal in Derrida’s terms) in order to think through our relational limitations and inhibitions.<sup>14</sup> She draws out the relationship Derrida notes between being and following, such that to be is also to be following, to be responding to the call of something, human or not. This insight helps to frame the attention to vibrant matter as a response to thingly agency rather than a projection of human agency onto things. However, Bennett stops short of pursuing Derrida by abandoning the focal phenomenological tract aimed at negotiating alterity. Derrida’s “The Animal Therefore That I Am” is not only about “following” the long-neglected animal to uncover new avenues for relational inquiry, as Bennett suggests. Derrida also interrogates the gaze of the human, its projection onto the gaze of the animal-other, and the anthropomorphic transference that changes a radically un subordinateable other into a human instrument or appendage—both an extension of our own gaze and embodied feelings of shame, as well as tools for our use, consumption, and disposal. Derrida leaves space for the alterity of the animal, which we can read as an analogue for the alterity of things or objects.<sup>15</sup> His attention to the animal is a decisive ethical, philosophical, and political gesture: “Nothing can ever take away from me the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized” (379). The animal gaze for Derrida is a “bottomless gaze” that incites an apocalyptic response in the gazed-at human. It marks the “abyssal limit of the human” (381). We thus get two abysses: the explicit one that stands between man and animal and marks the “ends of man,” and the other, I suggest, is the bottomless gaze of the animal itself, which localizes for Derrida “the absolute alterity of the neighbor” (380). The alterity of the gaze is crucial to an ethics begun out of a respect for distinct and

<sup>14</sup> See Derrida, Jacques. “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow).” Trans. David Wills. *Critical Inquiry*, 28, Winter 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida makes clear that the problem with the monolithic nomination of “animal” is that it gathers into it all types of creatures differentially unknowable, a critique that parallels mine re: Bennett’s universalized “human” obliterating all differences across distinct human beings.

unrelegatable beings, but it also results in an aesthetic and affective evaluation of oneself and one's own gaze, as performed by Derrida's auto-affective piece that faces both inward and outward. We can here note some limited compatibilities between Derrida on animality and object-oriented ontology (OOO), to better gesture towards competing views of alterity within and beyond Bennett, as active in the theoretical literature today. Beyond a mutual respect for radical or "fully-withdrawn" alterity, both Derrida and OOO invest in the decentering of the subject or the enlargement of the world to include human and nonhuman beings in their inaccessible strangeness. Both posit the being-before-ness of nonhuman being—the animal is before us, says Derrida, it is we who follow after it, which is a way of saying that nonhuman things do not emerge out of acting or in contact with human categories—they exist before our conceptual and linguistic representation of them, and they precede and subsist apart from our gaze (380). Similarly, human beings are all equally objects among other objects for OOO, and the peculiarity of human objects does not warrant their primacy or justify their dominion.<sup>16</sup> Derrida's account exercises discretion in thinking about dormant, fully withdrawn objects and less withdrawn, relational ones, by phrasing these different economies of separation in terms of "neighborliness," as that which is more or less far from us as we experience it, determined by our human ability to commune and identify with a thing or not. We can thus recognize that there is a difference for us between encountering a cat and say, an ant, but Derrida nonetheless advocates for a recognition of living things that acknowledges neighborly nearness or farness without it becoming a site to premise either identity or neglect.

Derrida's treatment of the animal exhibits something like a politics or ethics of concession—a recognition that the incapacity to know the unknowable other is not resolved by our overreaching and mostly failing anthropomorphic tendencies. A study for

<sup>16</sup> Of course, there are also unsquareable differences between the two approaches, mostly revolving around the problem of language and representation, insurmountable for Derrida but not for OOO. Graham Harman critiques deconstruction and philosophies of difference as still resulting in subject-fetishization and a view of objects as unstable and without identity, wherein "the object is treated as nothing more than the grammatical superstition of traditionalist dupes, drugged by the opiate of noun/verb Western grammar" (Harman, Graham. "On the Undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno, and Radical Philosophy." *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Eds. Levi R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek & Graham Harman, re.press: 2011, p. 23-4).

another day would be to flesh out how a politics of concession can be a precept widened beyond our engagement with the animal or with vibrant matter, such that it reconnects with politics at the level of the human. Such an approach would recognize that we cannot experience the non-human non-anthropomorphically, that we cannot think intent or affect or motivation beyond a human sensibility, that we will forever be entangled in the enigmas of representation and language in trying to meet that unknowability—but also, crucially, it would recognize that these quandaries do not only apply to things or animals but also to the relationships between human beings, who similarly approach each other as other, and in particularly antagonistic cases, as less-than-human others. There is space within such a politics of concession to improve relations with nonhumans and humans alike. Unlike OOO and Derrida, the latter of whom Bennett hopes to follow and the former of whom Bennett has been in an ongoing public dialogue with,<sup>17</sup> Bennett never gets to a politics or ethics of concession in her undue commitment to accessing thing-power and her failure to acknowledge alterity. In fact, as we will see, it is not clear to what extent an ethics is available to her at all.

### Sustainable Engagements

Bennett's argument in *Vibrant Matter* is ultimately untenable on the level of the ontological premises it sets out from, even while its end goal—to foster an attention to thing-power and to promote more sustainable engagements in our increasingly ecologically vulnerable world—is a vital one.

In the spirit of retention and resuscitation, we might say that Bennett's strategy works well as a generative relational philosophy rather than a recalibrated post-anthropocentric ontology. Perhaps we are better to think of Bennett's political ecology as

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<sup>17</sup> See for example Bennett, Jane. "Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton." *New Literary History*, 43(2), 2012, pp. 225-233 and Harman, Graham. "Materialism is Not the Solution: On Matter, Form, and Mimesis." *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*. 47, 2014, pp. 94-110.

an anthropology of the sort that Marilyn Strathern recommends, whereby “people become momentarily conscious both of their own centrality and of the necessity to maintain relations with other centers on their periphery” (85).<sup>18</sup> This is to accept that her account mobilizes the anthropocentric orientation she wants to resist, and to return her account to its status as a practical political ecology, which she hoped to bypass in favor of a foray into the realm of the “ontological imaginary” (57).

I look for a more charitable and redemptive route here because I appreciate that as I take Bennett to task for the epistemological allegiances and the vehement generalization of the subject baked into her ontology, sea levels are rising and have been rising over the last two decades twice as fast as they did in the century prior and that ecological disaster is projected to generate tens of millions of climate migrants by 2050. Bennett’s account remains attractive to us less because of its radicalizing ontology than because of its ecocritical and environmentally-conscious sensibility. Since we cannot know thing-power beyond our experience of it and since delineating ethical aspirations from the perspective of vibrant matter is still to do so from the perspective of the first-person observing human, we have shown that Bennett’s thingly ethics already reside where Bennett damningly says the environmental discourse resides, “in the substrate of human culture” (111). An ethics undoubtedly falls out from Bennett’s account, but it is not the ethics she intends, it is not the ethics that “discern[s] nonhuman vitality” by bracketing the human—it is an ethics that attends to thing-power as mobilized by the human observer’s insistence that matter is agential in highly particular ways.

Negotiating Bennett’s argument also yields an insight that by far supersedes the specific inner workings of Vibrant Matter. Namely, that no anti-anthropocentric account of thingly agency can theoretically populate and characterize this agency without reinscribing projective anthropocentric tendencies onto that agency, which necessarily exists apart from us. Things do not only persist in frenzied networks of rabid relation, nor is each thing separated from every other thing by unbroachable gulfs that strand objects and others on infinitely separate, untouchable isles. This means affirming the alterity of

<sup>18</sup> Strathern, Marilyn. *Partial Connections*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991.

the other—an affirmation that can be made, but which expresses (almost schematically) the limit of what we can know—while refusing forms of conjecture that absorb alterity or unknowability once more into the fabric of human classification. It is for this reason that we must cultivate, in tandem, an understanding of alterity as persistent and unalterable and, simultaneously, why we must bridle the tendency toward the epistemological overreach that attempts to colonize, inhabit, and represent that alterity. If we have already trespassed despite this epistemological deadlock, as Bennett has, we must work on retreating, on intervening to evacuate from the sphere of the other our persistent techniques of governance, to concede to alterity's ungovernability.

Reading Bennett against Bennett in this way, as invested in human survival and sustainability, albeit in a way more receptive to nonhuman actors, would not rehabilitate Bennett's project with respect to the critiques of new materialism raised by queer, anti-colonial, and black studies scholars in particular (as seen above). This would only provide key philosophical correctives and clarifications at the level of Bennett's ontology. However, resituating *Vibrant Matter* in its proper anthropocentric paradigm might provide greater opportunities for contact with subject-oriented anti-humanist discourses. Without such amendments, Bennett's project, instead of cultivating more sustainable engagements with vibrant matter, actually systematically subordinates the discourse of ecological sustainability to a vibrant but paralyzed ontology, when its potential promise (ethically and affectually) inheres in its anthropological, anthropocentric sensibilities and its thoughtful reworking, from this standpoint, of the environmental imaginary.