

Vibrant Matter

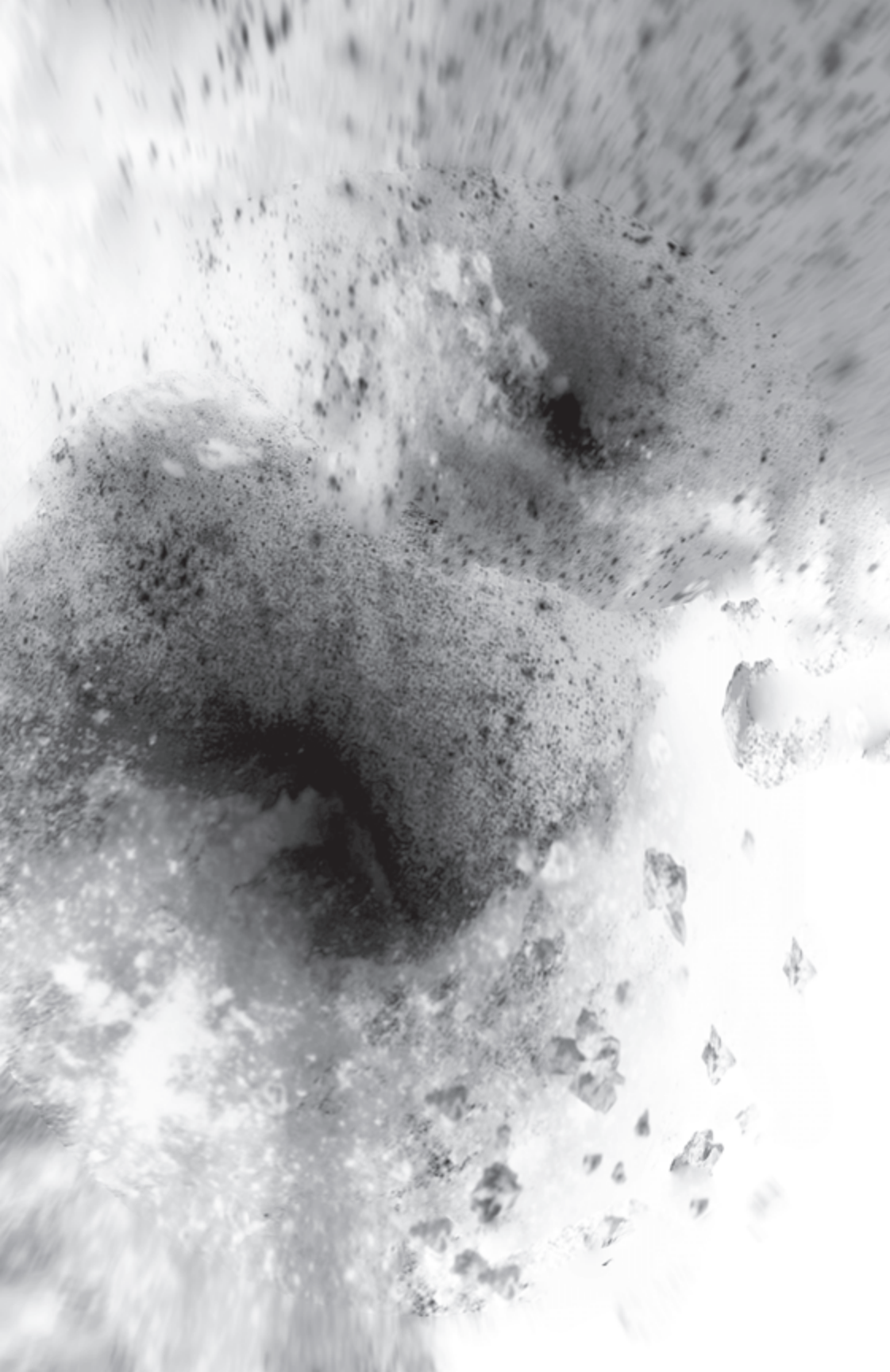
a political ecology of things



Jane Bennett

Vibrant Matter

A John Hope Franklin Center Book



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A Political Ecology of Things

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Preface

This book has a philosophical project and, related to it, a political one. The philosophical project is to think slowly an idea that runs fast through modern heads: the idea of matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert. This habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings) is a “partition of the sensible,” to use Jacques Rancière’s phrase.¹ The quarantines of matter and life encourage us to ignore the vitality *of* matter and the lively powers *of* material formations, such as the way omega-3 fatty acids can alter human moods or the way our trash is not “away” in landfills but generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane as we speak.² I will turn the figures of “life” and “matter” around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange, in something like the way a common word when repeated can become a foreign, nonsense sound. In the space created by this estrangement, a *vital materiality* can start to take shape.

Or, rather, it can take shape again, for a version of this idea already found expression in childhood experiences of a world populated by animate things rather than passive objects. I will try to reinvoke this

sense, to awaken what Henri Bergson described as “a latent belief in the spontaneity of nature.”³ The idea of vibrant matter also has a long (and if not latent, at least not dominant) philosophical history in the West. I will reinvoke this history too, drawing in particular on the concepts and claims of Baruch Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henry David Thoreau, Charles Darwin, Theodor Adorno, Gilles Deleuze, and the early twentieth-century vitalisms of Bergson and Hans Driesch.

The political project of the book is, to put it most ambitiously, to encourage more intelligent and sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things. A guiding question: How would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies? By “vitality” I mean the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own. My aspiration is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due. How, for example, would patterns of consumption change if we faced not litter, rubbish, trash, or “the recycling,” but an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter? What difference would it make to public health if eating was understood as an encounter between various and variegated bodies, some of them mine, most of them not, and none of which always gets the upper hand? What issues would surround stem cell research in the absence of the assumption that the only source of vitality in matter is a soul or spirit? What difference would it make to the course of energy policy were electricity to be figured not simply as a resource, commodity, or instrumentality but also and more radically as an “actant”?

The term is Bruno Latour’s: an actant is 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. It is “any entity that modifies another entity in a trial,” something whose “competence is deduced from [its] performance” rather than posited in advance of the action.⁴ Some actants are better described as protoactants, for these performances or energies are too small or too fast to be “things.”⁵ I admire Latour’s attempt to develop a vocabulary that addresses multiple modes and degrees of effectivity, to

begin to describe a more *distributive* agency. Latour strategically elides what is commonly taken as distinctive or even unique about humans, and so will I. At least for a while and up to a point. I lavish attention on specific “things,” noting the distinctive capacities or efficacious powers of particular material configurations. To attempt, as I do, to present human and nonhuman actants on a less vertical plane than is common is to bracket the question of the human and to elide the rich and diverse literature on subjectivity and its genesis, its conditions of possibility, and its boundaries. The philosophical project of naming where subjectivity begins and ends is too often bound up with fantasies of a human uniqueness in the eyes of God, of escape from materiality, or of mastery of nature; and even where it is not, it remains an aporetic or quixotic endeavor.

In what follows the otherwise important topic of subjectivity thus gets short shrift so that I may focus on the task of developing a vocabulary and syntax for, and thus a better discernment of, the active powers issuing from nonsubjects. I want to highlight what is typically cast in the shadow: the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things. I will try to make a meal out of the stuff left out of the feast of political theory done in the anthropocentric style. In so doing, I court the charge of performative self-contradiction: is it not a human subject who, after all, is articulating this theory of vibrant matter? Yes and no, for I will argue that what looks like a performative contradiction may well dissipate if one considers revisions in operative notions of matter, life, self, self-interest, will, and agency.

Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies. These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even “respect” (provided that the term be stretched beyond its Kantian sense). The figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption. 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. (The “ecological” character of a vital materialism is the focus of the last two chapters.)

In the “Treatise on Nomadology,” Deleuze and Félix Guattari experiment with the idea of a “material vitalism,” according to which vitality is immanent in matter-energy.⁶ That project has helped inspire mine. Like Deleuze and Guattari, I draw selectively from Epicurean, Spinozist, Nietzschean, and vitalist traditions, as well as from an assortment of contemporary writers in science and literature. I need all the help I can get, for this project calls for the pursuit of several tasks simultaneously: (1) to paint a positive ontology of vibrant matter, which stretches received concepts of agency, action, and freedom sometimes to the breaking point; (2) to dissipate the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic using arguments and other rhetorical means to induce in human bodies an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality; and (3) to sketch a style of political analysis that can better account for the contributions of nonhuman actants.

In what follows, then, I try to bear witness to the vital materialities that flow through and around us. Though the movements and effectivity of stem cells, electricity, food, trash, and metals are crucial to political life (and human life *per se*), almost as soon as they appear in public (often at first by disrupting human projects or expectations), these activities and powers are represented as human mood, action, meaning, agenda, or ideology. This quick substitution sustains the fantasy that “we” really are in charge of all those “its”—its that, according to the tradition of (nonmechanistic, nonteleological) materialism I draw on, reveal themselves to be potentially forceful agents.

Spinoza stands as a touchstone for me in this book, even though he himself was not quite a materialist. I invoke his idea of conative bodies that strive to enhance their power of activity by forming alliances with other bodies, and I share his faith that everything is made of the same substance. Spinoza rejected the idea that man “disturbs rather than follows Nature’s order,” and promises instead to “consider human actions and appetites just as if it were an investigation into lines, planes, or bodies.”⁷ Lucretius, too, expressed a kind of monism in his *De Rerum*

Natura: everything, he says, is made of the same quirky stuff, the same building blocks, if you will. Lucretius calls them *primordia*; today we might call them atoms, quarks, particle streams, or matter-energy. This same-stuff claim, this insinuation that deep down everything is connected and irreducible to a simple substrate, resonates with an *ecological sensibility*, and that too is important to me. But in contrast to some versions of deep ecology, my monism posits neither a smooth harmony of parts nor a diversity unified by a common spirit. The formula here, writes Deleuze, is “ontologically one, formally diverse.”⁸ This is, as Michel Serres says in *The Birth of Physics*, a turbulent, immanent field in which various and variable materialities collide, congeal, morph, evolve, and disintegrate.⁹ Though I find Epicureanism to be too simple in its imagery of individual atoms falling and swerving in the void, I share its conviction that there remains a natural *tendency* to the way things are—and that human decency and a decent politics are fostered if we tune in to the strange logic of turbulence.

Impersonal Affect

When I wrote *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, my focus was on the ethical relevance of human affect, more specifically, of the mood of enchantment or that strange combination of delight and disturbance. The idea was that moments of sensuous enchantment with the everyday world—with nature but also with commodities and other cultural products—might augment the motivational energy needed to move selves from the endorsement of ethical principles to the actual practice of ethical behaviors.

The theme of that book participated in a larger trend within political theory, a kind of ethical and aesthetic turn inspired in large part by feminist studies of the body and by Michel Foucault’s work on “care of the self.” These inquiries helped put “desire” and bodily practices such as physical exercise, meditation, sexuality, and eating back on the ethical radar screen. Some in political theory, perhaps most notably Nancy Fraser in *Justice Interruptus*, criticized this turn as a retreat to soft, psycho-cultural issues of identity at the expense of the hard, political issues of economic justice, environmental sustainability, human

rights, or democratic governance. Others (I am in this camp) replied that the bodily disciplines through which ethical sensibilities and social relations are formed and reformed are *themselves* political and constitute a whole (underexplored) field of “micropolitics” without which any principle or policy risks being just a bunch of words. There will be no greening of the economy, no redistribution of wealth, no enforcement or extension of rights without human dispositions, moods, and cultural ensembles hospitable to these effects.

The ethical turn encouraged political theorists to pay more attention to films, religious practices, news media rituals, neuroscientific experiments, and other noncanonical means of ethical will formation. In the process, “ethics” could no longer refer primarily to a set of doctrines; it had to be considered as a complex set of relays between moral contents, aesthetic-affective styles, and public moods. Here political theorists affirmed what Romantic thinkers (I am thinking of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Schiller, Nietzsche, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau, and Walt Whitman) had long noted: if a set of moral principles is actually to be lived out, the right mood or landscape of affect has to be in place.

I continue to think of affect as central to politics and ethics, but in this book I branch out to an “affect” not specific to human bodies. I want now to focus less on the enhancement to human relational capacities resulting from affective catalysts and more on the catalyst itself as it exists in nonhuman bodies. This power is not transpersonal or intersubjective but impersonal, an affect intrinsic to forms that cannot be imagined (even ideally) as persons. I now emphasize even more how the figure of enchantment points in two directions: the first toward the humans who *feel* enchanted and whose agentic capacities may be thereby strengthened, and the second toward the agency of the things that *produce* (helpful, harmful) effects in human and other bodies.¹⁰ Organic and inorganic bodies, natural and cultural objects (these distinctions are not particularly salient here) *all* are affective. I am here drawing on a Spinozist notion of affect, which refers broadly to the capacity of any body for activity and responsiveness. Deleuze and Guattari put the point this way: “We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, . . . to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, . . . to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with in composing

a more powerful body.”¹¹ Or, according to David Cole, “affects entail the colliding of particle-forces delineating the impact of one body on another; this could also be explained as the capacity to feel force before [or without] subjective emotion. . . . Affects create a field of forces that do not tend to congeal into subjectivity.”¹² What I am calling impersonal affect or material vibrancy is not a spiritual supplement or “life force” added to the matter said to house it. Mine is not a vitalism in the traditional sense; I equate affect with materiality, rather than posit a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body.

My aim, again, is to theorize a vitality intrinsic to materiality as such, and to detach materiality from the figures of passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance. This vibrant matter is *not* the raw material for the creative activity of humans or God. It is my body, but also the bodies of Baltimore litter (chapter 1), Prometheus’s chains (chapter 4), and Darwin’s worms (chapter 7), as well as the not-quite-bodies of electricity (chapter 2), ingested food (chapter 3), and stem cells (chapters 5 and 6).

A Note on Methodology

I pursue a materialism in the tradition of Democritus-Epicurus-Spinoza-Diderot-Deleuze more than Hegel-Marx-Adorno. It is important to follow the trail of human power to expose social hegemonies (as historical materialists do). But my contention is that there is also public value in following the scent of a nonhuman, thingly power, the material agency of natural bodies and technological artifacts. Here I mean “to follow” in the sense in which Jacques Derrida develops it in the context of his meditation on animals. Derrida points to the intimacy between being and following: to be (anything, anyone) is always to be following (something, someone), always to be in response to call from something, however nonhuman it may be.¹³

What method could possibly be appropriate for the task of speaking a word for vibrant matter? How to describe without thereby erasing the independence of things? How to acknowledge the obscure but ubiquitous intensity of impersonal affect? What seems to be needed is a certain willingness to appear naive or foolish, to affirm what Adorno called his “clownish traits.”¹⁴ This entails, in my case, a willingness to

theorize events (a blackout, a meal, an imprisonment in chains, an experience of litter) as encounters between ontologically diverse actants, some human, some not, though all thoroughly material.¹⁵

What is also needed is a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces operating outside and inside the human body. I have tried to learn how to induce an attentiveness to things and their affects from Thoreau, Franz Kafka, and Whitman, as well as from the eco- and ecofeminist philosophers Romand Coles, Val Plumwood, Wade Sikorski, Freya Mathews, Wendell Berry, Angus Fletcher, Barry Lopez, and Barbara Kingsolver. Without proficiency in this countercultural kind of perceiving, the world appears as if it consists only of active human subjects who confront passive objects and their law-governed mechanisms. This appearance may be indispensable to the action-oriented perception on which our survival depends (as Nietzsche and Bergson each in his own way contends), but it is also dangerous and counterproductive to live this fiction all the time (as Nietzsche and Bergson also note), and neither does it conduce to the formation of a “greener” sensibility.

For *this* task, demystification, that most popular of practices in critical theory, should be used with caution and sparingly, because demystification presumes that at the heart of any event or process lies a *human* agency that has illicitly been projected into things. This hermeneutics of suspicion calls for theorists to be on high alert for signs of the secret truth (a human will to power) below the false appearance of nonhuman agency. Karl Marx sought to demystify commodities and prevent their fetishization by showing them to be invested with an agency that belongs to humans; patriotic Americans under the Bush regime exposed the self-interest, greed, or cruelty inside the “global war on terror” or inside the former attorney general Alberto Gonzales’s version of the rule of law; the feminist theorist Wendy Brown demystifies when she promises to “remove the scales from our eyes” and reveal that “the discourse of tolerance . . . [valorizes] the West, othering the rest . . . while feigning to do no more than . . . extend the benefits of liberal thought and practices.”¹⁶

Demystification is an indispensable tool in a democratic, pluralist politics that seeks to hold officials accountable to (less unjust versions of) the rule of law and to check attempts to impose a system of (racial, civilizational, religious, sexual, class) domination. But there are limits to its political efficacy, among them that exposés of illegality, greed,

mendacity, oligarchy, or hypocrisy do not reliably produce moral outrage and that, if they do, this outrage may or may not spark ameliorative action. Brown, too, acknowledges that even if the exposé of the “false conceits” of liberal tolerance were to weaken the “justification” for the liberal quest for empire, it would not necessarily weaken the “motivation” for empire.¹⁷ What is more, ethical political action on the part of humans seems to require not only a vigilant critique of existing institutions but also positive, even utopian alternatives.¹⁸ Jodi Dean, another advocate for demystification, recognizes this liability: “If all we can do is evaluate, critique, or demystify the present, then what is it that we are hoping to accomplish?”¹⁹ A relentless approach toward demystification works against the possibility of positive formulations. In a discussion of the François Mitterrand government, Foucault broke with his former tendency to rely on demystification and proposed specific reforms in the domain of sexuality: “I’ve become rather irritated by an attitude, which for a long time was mine, too, and which I no longer subscribe to, which consists in saying: our problem is to denounce and criticize: let them get on with their legislation and reforms. That doesn’t seem to me like the right attitude.”²⁰ The point, again, is that we need both critique and positive formulations of alternatives, alternatives that will themselves become the objects of later critique and reform.

What demystification uncovers is always something human, for example, the hidden quest for domination on the part of some humans over others, a human desire to deflect responsibility for harms done, or an unjust distribution of (human) power. Demystification tends to screen from view the vitality of matter and to reduce *political* agency to *human* agency. Those are the tendencies I resist.

The capacity to detect the presence of impersonal affect requires that one is caught up in it. One needs, at least for a while, to suspend suspicion and adopt a more open-ended comportment. If we think we already know what is out there, we will almost surely miss much of it.

Materialisms

Several years ago I mentioned to a friend that Thoreau’s notion of the Wild had interesting affinities with Deleuze’s idea of the virtual and with Foucault’s notion of the unthought. All three thinkers are trying

to acknowledge a force that, though quite real and powerful, is intrinsically resistant to representation.²¹ My friend replied that she did not much care for French poststructuralism, for it “lacked a materialist perspective.” At the time I took this reply as a way of letting me know that she was committed to a Marx-inspired, egalitarian politics. But the comment stuck, and it eventually provoked these thoughts: Why did Foucault’s concern with “bodies and pleasures” or Deleuze’s and Guattari’s interest in “machinic assemblages” not count as *materialist*? How did Marx’s notion of materiality—as economic structures and exchanges that provoke many other events—come to stand for the materialist perspective per se? Why is there not a more robust debate between contending philosophies of materiality or between contending accounts of how materiality matters to politics?

For some time political theory has acknowledged that materiality matters. But this materiality most often refers to human social structures or to the human meanings “embodied” in them and other objects. Because politics is itself often construed as an exclusively human domain, what registers on it is a set of material constraints on or a context for human action. Dogged resistance to anthropocentrism is perhaps the main difference between the vital materialism I pursue and this kind of historical materialism.²² I will emphasize, even overemphasize, the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and in human artifacts) in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought. 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.

In chapter 1, “The Force of Things,” I explore two terms in a vital materialist vocabulary: *thing-power* and the *out-side*. Thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience. I look at how found objects (my examples come from litter on the street, a toy creature in a Kafka story, a technical gadget used in criminal investigations) can become vibrant things with a certain effectivity of their own, a perhaps small but irreducible degree of independence from the words, images, and feelings they provoke in us. I present this as a liveliness intrinsic to the materiality of the thing formerly known as an object. This raises a

metaquestion: is it really possible to theorize this vibrancy, or is it (as Adorno says it is) a quest that is not only futile but also tied to the hubristic human will to comprehensive knowledge and the violent human will to dominate and control? In the light of his critique, and given Adorno's own efforts in *Negative Dialectics* to "grope toward the preponderance of the object," I defend the "naive" ambition of a vital materialism.²³

The concept of thing-power offers an alternative to the object as a way of encountering the nonhuman world. It also has (at least) two liabilities: first, it attends only to the vitality of stable or fixed entities (things), and second, it presents this vitality in terms that are too individualistic (even though the individuals are not human beings). In chapter 2, "The Agency of Assemblages," I enrich the picture of material agency through the notion of "assemblages," borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari. The locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group. I move from the vitality of a discrete thing to vitality as a (Spinozist) function of the tendency of matter to conglomerate or form heterogeneous groupings. I then explore the agency of human-nonhuman assemblages through the example of the electrical power grid, focusing on a 2003 blackout that affected large sections of North America.

In chapter 3, "Edible Matter," I repeat the experiment by focusing on food. Drawing on studies of obesity, recent food writing, and on ideas formulated by Thoreau and Nietzsche on the question of diet, I present the case for edible matter as an actant operating inside and alongside humankind, exerting influence on moods, dispositions, and decisions. I here begin to defend a conception of self, developed in later chapters, as itself an impure, human-nonhuman assemblage. I also consider, but ultimately eschew, the alternative view that the vibrancy I posit in matter is best attributed to a nonmaterial source, to an animating spirit or "soul."

Chapter 4, "A Life of Metal," continues to gnaw away at the life/matter binary, this time through the concept of "a life." I take up the hard case for a (nonmechanistic) materialism that conceives of matter as intrinsically lively (but not ensouled): the case of inorganic matter. My example is metal. What can it mean to say that metal—usually the avatar of a rigid and inert substance—is vibrant matter? I compare the "adamantine chains" that bind Aeschylus's Prometheus to a rock to the polycrystalline metal described by the historian of science Cyril Smith.

Vital materialism as a doctrine has affinities with several nonmodern

(and often discredited) modes of thought, including animism, the Romantic quest for Nature, and vitalism. Some of these affinities I embrace, some I do not. I reject the life/matter binary informing classical vitalism. In chapters 5 and 6 I ask why this divide has been so persistent and defended so militantly, especially as developments in the natural sciences and in bioengineering have rendered the line between organic and inorganic, life and matter, increasingly problematic. In Chapter 5, “Neither Mechanism nor Vitalism,” I focus on three fascinating attempts to name the “vital force” in matter: Immanuel Kant’s *Bildungstrieb*, the embryologist Driesch’s *entelechy*, and Bergson’s *élan vital*. Driesch and Bergson both sought to infuse philosophy with the science of their day, and both were skeptical about mechanistic models of nature. To me, their vitalisms constituted an invaluable holding action, maintaining an open space that a philosophy of vibrant materiality could fill.

In Chapter 6, “Stems Cells and the Culture of Life,” I explore the latter-day vitalism of George W. Bush and other evangelical defenders of a “culture of life” as expressed in political debates about embryonic stem cell research during the final years of the Bush administration. I appreciate the pluripotentiality of stem cells but resist the effort of culture-of-life advocates to place these cells on one side of a radical divide between life and nonlife.

Chapter 7, “Political Ecologies,” was the most difficult to conceive and write, because there I stage a meeting between the (meta)physics of vital materialism and a political theory. I explore how a conception of vibrant matter could resound in several key concepts of political theory, including the “public,” “political participation,” and “the political.” I begin with a discussion of one more example of vibrant matter, the inventive worms studied by Darwin. Darwin treats worms as actants operating not only in nature but in *history*: “Worms have played a more important part in the history of the world than most persons would at first assume.”²⁴ Darwin’s anthropomorphizing prompts me to consider the reverse case: whether a polity might itself be a kind of ecosystem. I use (and stretch) John Dewey’s model of a public as the emergent effect of a problem to defend such an idea. But I also consider the objection to it posed by Rancière, who both talks about dissonances coming from outside the regime of political intelligibility and models politics as a unique realm of exclusively human endeavor. I end the chapter by

endorsing a definition of politics as a political *ecology* and a notion of publics as human-nonhuman collectives that are provoked into existence by a shared experience of harm. I imagine this public to be one of the “disruptions” that Rancière names as the quintessentially political act.

In the last chapter, “Vitality and Self-interest,” I gather together the various links between ecophilosophy and a vital materialism. What are some tactics for cultivating the experience of our *selves* as vibrant matter? The task is to explore ways to engage effectively and sustainably this enchanting and dangerous matter-energy.

