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

At the 2011 Western Literature Association Conference, Cheryll Glotfelty presented on the photographer Peter Goin. Speaking of Goin's work at Sedan Crater, a nuclear site used in 1962 to test the feasibility of nuclear bombs for mining applications, Glotfelty suggested it was critical that we understand something about the environment: matter responds, and matter requires a response to it. Landscape is not merely setting, and the matter that composes landscapes is not passive. For Glotfelty, Goin's photographs—his "visual solution" of photographic exposure and deaestheticization—helped translate the environment's responsiveness to destructive levels of radioactivity. Glotfelty demonstrated in her presentation the importance of a relatively new movement in the field of ecocriticism and part of an emergent third wave of ecocritical practice. Referred to variously as material ecocriticism, material feminism, or vital materialism, the new movement is inspired to understand the world of matter as active, forceful, and able to produce effects in other bodies, including human bodies.

A key text in this nascent field is Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Bennett is Professor of Political Theory and Chair of the Department of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University, and her disciplinary background in political science is a key influence on her text, most importantly her assumption that matter must be reconfigured as an affective and active part of a political process now dominated by human subjectivity. In fact, the major project of *Vibrant Matter* is to rethink our "habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)" and instead conceive of the "vitality of matter" (vii). Bennett thus engages one of ecocriticism's longstanding and important problems: how to think our way beyond a world divided into a hierarchy of subjects and objects in which the environment and all things nonhuman are considered passive, instrumental, and subordinate to human activity.

Bennett argues that dissolving the subject-object binary, and thereby improving our "ecological sensibility," requires that we "begin to *experience* the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally" (10). In order to help us do this, Bennett begins to deconstruct the notion of "agentic capacity" as limited to human intention. Agency, she argues, needs to be "distributed across a wider range of ontological types" so that things, like food and minerals, can be reconceived as having the ability to produce effects (10). To help broaden the notion of agency, Bennett introduces a theoretical language borrowed from Lucretius, Baruch Spinoza, Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari that refigures the agent as "swarm," "actant," "assemblage," and "quasi-causal operator" (9). Unlike agent, these terms take for granted nonhuman sources of action and reaction. They also assume that bodies never act alone, and that an event is never solely determined by the intentions of a single body. In this swarm, and in the constantly emerging events precipitated from it, subjects and objects rematerialize as active, vital matter. The subject and object thus cease to exist as categories.

In this scheme all *things* are not the same, and Bennett clearly states that horizontal thinking does not flatten the difference between humans and the assemblage of things in which humans participate. In doing so, she addresses a critical concern that accompanies any attempt to obviate subjectivity: "in failing to affirm human uniqueness, such views authorize the treatment of people as mere things; in

other words, that a strong distinction between subjects and objects is needed to prevent the instrumentalization of humans." Dividing the world into human subjects and nonhuman objects provides the "*moral* grounds" for privileging and protecting human beings from human-on-human exploitation. Bennett's response to this important objection is smart and compelling. She admits that a world parsed into human subjects and nonhuman objects has done much to curb human suffering and increase human happiness. However, it has also led to the complete "instrumentalization of nonhuman nature that can itself be unethical and can itself undermine long-term human interests." Finally, the Kantian notion that humanity is always an end-in-itself has a very poor record of preventing human exploitation. What Bennett suggests, and here she makes explicit a radical assumption for a new kind of ecocritical practice, is that we "face up to the compound nature of the human self . . . . [the] swarm of competing ends being pursued simultaneously in each individual, some of which are healthy to the whole, some of which are not." In doing so, we "raise the status of the materiality of which we are composed" and can then pursue health and happiness in a more ethically responsible way (12).

Throughout *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett models her theory by re-visioning objects as actants: as sources of action, as participants in a political ecology, as matter that responds and requires a response. And she is very successful in activating, so to speak, her subject matter. She passes over animals and plants (easily seen as active) and addresses, instead, the participatory activity of electricity, edibles, and metals, which are normally understood as passive, mechanistic, and subject to human intention. In chapter 3, "edible matter," for instance, Bennett, by incisively explicating Thoreau's "wildness" and Nietzsche's "warrior food," argues that "human and nonhuman bodies recorporealize in response to each other; both exercise formative power and both offer themselves as matter to be acted on. Eating appears as a series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurry" (49). Though an interesting idea in its own right, these mutual transformations are not just a thought experiment: as she does with her readings of other vibrant matter, Bennett makes sure we understand how this shift in thought has important political implications. Ingestion is a political act, and "[t]o the extent that we recognize the agency of food, we also reorient our own experience of eating" (51). If edibles in the "eating encounter" require a response, "then a materiality experienced as a lively force with agentic capacity could animate a more ecologically sustainable public" (51).

Bennett's model for replacing subjects and objects with actants and assemblages has an important consequence: it bridges the gap between ecological and public domains so that ecosystems and political systems are approached in the same way. The two spaces become a single polity made up of heterogeneous human and nonhuman participants, and all participants are brought together to form temporary publics in response to shared problems. This "political ecology of things" changes the way problem solving is approached, always striving to understand the affective pressures exerted by all things operating within the system. Bennett stresses that "[t]he political goal of a vital materialism is not the perfect equality of actants, but a polity with more channels of communication between members" (104). For ecocritics interested in practicing Bennett's style of materialism, the most difficult task moving forward will be learning to hear nonhuman arguments—the kind not expressed in words—and then figuring out how to respond in ways that account for the health of a world newly understood as vibrant matter.

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